

BYWAYS IN
BOOKLAND

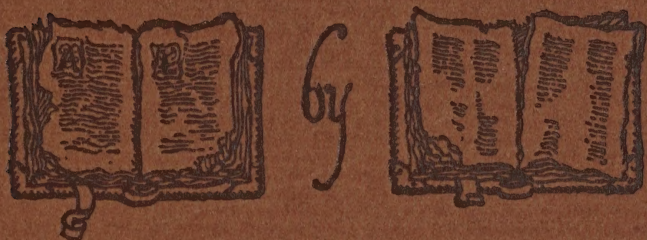


by



WALTER A. MURSELL

BYWAYS IN BOOKLAND



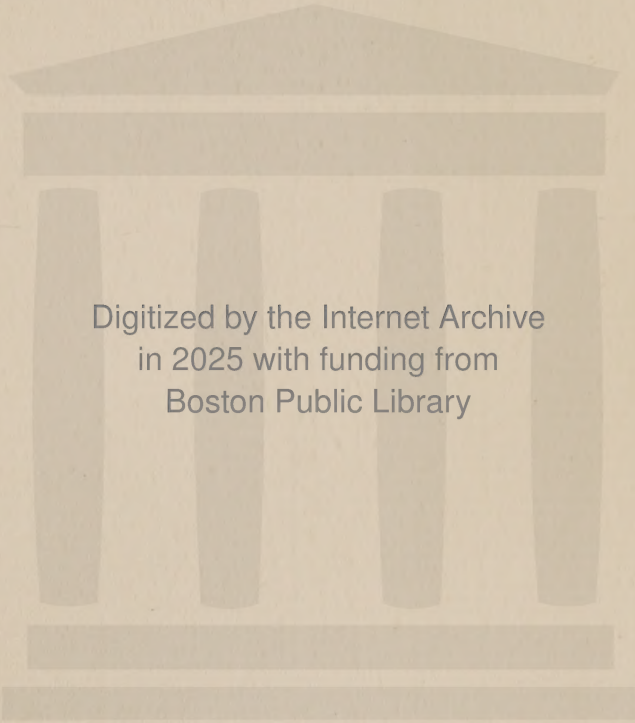
WALTER A. MURSELL

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BYWAYS IN BOOKLAND
CONFESSIONS AND DIGRESSIONS

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BY

WALTER A. MURSELL

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TO
THE MEMORY OF
M. D. R.
WHO LOVED BOOKS
AND NATURE AND HUMANITY

PREFACE

THE pages which follow make no pretension to literary criticism ; they are a simple record of happy and memorable hours spent in the company of favourite books, and a tribute of gratitude to their authors. Books have been my companions from boyhood ; and if the record here traced is only the means of introducing a few other boys to such congenial society, I shall not be ashamed of having been egotistic enough to set down some of my own impressions and confessions.

W. A. M.

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CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF A BOOK-LOVER

I CANNOT remember the time when I began to be a book-lover. It is so far back that I fancy it must be in that remote period when I had attained the dignified age of "a primordial, protoplasmal, atomic globule." Some things are in the blood, and we cannot help ourselves. Some men are born reading *The Times*, and they imbibe solid political opinions with their excellent pap. It was not *The Times* that won my infant suffrage; politics are a sealed book to me, and the news of the day is far too old to be of more than momentary interest. Events are limited and monotonous, and one could forecast the contents of the newspaper on any day of the week. But human nature is a perennial surprise, and so it comes to be that the interest of life is not in the things that happen, but in the men who see.

No; I was born reading a Book Catalogue, and life really began for me when I purchased my first book with my own money. It was not a high-class

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literature I affected at that time, but it served its turn. I passed through a beautiful and instructive evolution. It began with *The Boys of England Novelettes*, and proceeded thus: *The Boy's Own Paper*, *Young England*, *Tit-Bits*, *Cassell's Saturday Journal*, *Chambers' Journal*; and it stopped at *Chambers'* for ten years. When I say this was not high-class literature, I intend no disrespect to any of these excellent publications; I merely mean that they are not classical or permanent. They are all fugitive, and represent my apprenticeship to periodicals. Accompanying this evolution, and stimulating it at intervals, inoculating my taste (so to speak) with various injections, were certain volumes of standard reading to which reference will presently be made, including *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Arabian Nights*. This sealed my fate, and at the age of ten I knew myself to be a book-lover, and at twelve I began to be a book-buyer.

There is one great drawback to being a lover and a buyer of books, and that is that it requires unlimited pocket-money—a thing which I have never possessed. Apart from this lamentable feature, however, I have had few richer delights than browsing in bookshops. The sight of them and the smell of them are alike delectable. They are what form and outline and colour are to the artist, what beauty is to the poet, what springtime is to the lover, what summer meadows are to the child. It must not be one of those bookshops where black-coated, eagle-

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eyed, obsequious servitors stand at every corner and counter; who pounce upon you the moment you enter the door; who shadow you from shelf to shelf; who pursue you with unwelcome attentions into the second-hand department; who press all sorts of new volumes on your notice; who continually ask what it is you want and what they can do for you. I have not the moral courage to tell them that I have not the least idea what I want; that I have come there to find out what I want; that the only thing they can do for me is to let me alone. And when by some unlucky chance I happen upon such a shop, I mark it in my black books and shun it for ever. But there are other bookshops—thanks be to heaven!—where they know their business. They leave you to prowl at large, to browse at leisure; and if you go away without making a purchase, they do not scowl, or lift a supercilious eyebrow, or follow you with suspicious glances, as if they thought you had a first edition secreted under your waistcoat; they simply smile and wish you “Good-day,” and never even mention an equivalent to “Will ye no come back again!” They understand the peculiar and delicate psychology of the book-lover.

There is a bookshop which will ever be imprinted on my grateful memory; I sometimes see it in my dreams, for it assisted at my literary birth. I said there *is* a bookshop, but I should have said there *was*, for, alas! it has been swept away by the aggressive new broom of the London County Council—a tiny shop in a side-street off the *Clapham Road*,

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situate near *The Plough*. It was not strictly a bookshop, but a newsagent's; but it had a budding library in its diminutive rear-premises, and an occasional and sporadic display of gaudily bound volumes in the front window. It smelt strongly of saw-dust, damp tea-leaves, mildewed publications, and printers' ink; and to me this pungent complication of perfumes was as the odours of Araby. It was presided over by a little pale, pleasant-faced woman, who allowed me to prowl and browse to my heart's content. It was not possible to prowl far nor to browse extensively, for the whole establishment was not more than about twelve feet by ten, and you could reach anything you wanted without taking more than a couple of steps. I was drawn to this place by the appearance in the window of the small volumes of *Cassell's National Library*. They had only just begun to come out then—I was about sixteen at the time—and I eagerly watched for their appearance week by week. Small square books they were, in paper covers, and excellently printed; for threepence one might possess one of the choicest specimens of English literature. It was here also I bought a miniature edition of Shakespeare in twelve volumes—red cloth backs and corners, marbled sides—at a shilling a volume, which I still possess and highly prize.

A year later I began a four years' sojourn in North-West London, and here I lighted upon a second-hand bookshop in the neighbourhood of Marylebone. How many times have I walked across Regent's

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Park, and spent whole afternoons in this retreat ! It was generally on winter days I went, and I shall always associate the place with dark, foggy November afternoons and dreary bleak December days, when the gas was lit in the forenoon, and the iron stove at one end of the shop shed a crimson glow upon the floor, and diffused a grateful warmth throughout the stuffy atmosphere, bringing out the fragrance of the leather-bound volumes with peculiar pungency. Three or four brothers kept the shop—pale-faced, black-haired, dark-eyed, Roman-nosed men—who never interfered with one's movements, but attended assiduously to their accounts, and bound up one's parcels with immaculate neatness.

The joy of this establishment was its miscellaneous character, its perfect freedom, its suggestion of Bohemianism, its air of antiquity. One met all sorts of queer people in it. The books themselves were as the sand upon the seashore. I would pass from shelf to shelf as a bee flits from flower to flower, caressing the covers and sampling their contents. I acquired a considerable amount of strange lore in this predatory fashion, and learned many things which were not to be derived from my college curriculum. Such poetic taste as may be mine was created and quickened here. The corner where the poets dwelt drew me with irresistible attraction. I still have a volume of Hood's *Poems* from those precious shelves, bought on a biting January afternoon when the sleet was whirling outside ; a volume containing a book-plate on the fly-

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leaf, bearing the strange device of its former owner—a bare arm bent at the elbow, springing from a curious bar or perch, the fist tightly clenched around a poised javelin, and underneath the printed name of *Mervyn Marshall*. I have often wondered since who he was, and how his book found its way to the second-hand catalogue, and what was the significance of the javelin in the clenched fist.

The last time I was in London I went on a pilgrimage to this second-hand shrine. I wanted to renew the savour of it. As I walked across the park the old days came back as in a dream, and I conjured up a vision of what used to be a quarter of a century before. I saw the dark winter days, with the drifting fog and the frosty air gripping the nostrils like snuff. I saw the black stove, with an iron chimney mounting upwards through the dim roof, shedding the ruddy glow upon the floor and upon the shelves in its immediate neighbourhood. I saw it glinting brightly as of yore upon the musty folios, and caught its friendly gleam on the gilt-lettering of some richly bound volume, and read its title by the light of the fire. I saw the three black brothers, with their pale ascetic faces and their hawk-like noses lending a certain intellectual strength and distinction to their clean-cut features, clad in suits of solemn black, as though they were the undertakers in what Lord Rosebery might call this “cemetery of books.” I saw the shop itself, old, long, and rambling, dimly lit, half-filled with floating fog, haunted by ghostly

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figures drifting vaguely about like Shades in search of some lost talisman or open sesame.

In my dream I caught the old unearthly smell. It is not to be described by mortal pen. Old books always have a strange smell, but these old books had a perfectly miraculous smell. There were so many of them, and they were herded so closely together, and their ages were so various, and their bindings were so miscellaneous, and the whole atmosphere was impregnated with a heavy literary incense that made the head to swim like opium, and sent one drowsing through the land of dreams. Stevenson refers to the shop of his boyhood in Leith Walk, where he bought his stage-plays and sheets of characters, "penny plain, and twopence coloured," and declared that it "smelt of Bibles." My shop had something of that smell, too, but it was more powerful than Bibles. If I were to say there was a whiff of the earthy odours of the Tube Railways in it, I should be correct; yet there was something else. If I were to suggest that there was an aroma of mouldering walls, such as meets you on entering ancient crypts and churches, I should be true to fact; yet there was an extra. It was a combination of odours—printers' ink, musty leaves, antique leather, imperfectly laid dust, all warmed up by the glowing stove, and rendered ten times more commanding. It would float out at the shop door when it was open, and hover stagnant over a few yards of pavement; or it would be caught up by a passing breeze and sent prospecting up the street in quest of some literary

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nose, which, being a connoisseur in such perfumery, would be drawn instantly towards its native paradise.

I recalled as I walked how I used to wander there among the other Shades for hours. There is an extraordinary fascination to a bookman in dipping into all sorts of volumes in such a place as this. It is like setting forth upon an adventure, or going out to meet the mistress of one's heart. You can never tell what treasure you may light upon, or what new surprise may break from the familiar pages of some favourite, well beloved. I recalled the day when I spent the best part of a wintry afternoon poring over a magnificent illustrated copy of *The Arabian Nights*. My person was so adjusted to the glowing fire that I threw a gigantic shadow on the floor and wall, and when I awoke from the dream of my book I almost dropped it in terror, imagining myself confronted by one of the Genii of the East. There was only one richer dream than this pedatory browsing, and that was to find something that met both one's desires and one's resources, and to bear it homeward in triumph to the snug armchair in the chimney-corner.

I had arrived at this point in my meditations when I reached the enchanted ground. At first I could not find the shop. Not a sign of the old familiar features was visible. I retraced my steps several times, and began to examine the shop-fronts and the names with greater intentness. At last I found it, but oh, how changed! My vision came tumbling to earth. The same name, but the countenance of my old love was sadly altered. Instead of the flaring

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gas with a foggy halo round it, there glittered electric globes of ghastly tint; instead of the black stove with iron chimney piercing the rafters, there now appeared a modern fire-place with glazed tiles, and a serpentine system of hot-air pipes coiling about the walls. Where was the little counter where the books were piled and the parcels were made up and the coins passed hands? Gone! An open floor-space now, like a waste, howling wilderness. Where were the familiar shelves? Vanished! Not a landmark was the same. The shop extended now into remote regions at the rear; iron galleries ran round near the roof, reached by cunning spiral staircases; subterranean caverns yawned in the centre, to which one descended by wide polished steps; the Poet's Corner was removed. I could not find my way about this new emporium, nor lay my hand upon the inevitable shelf as in the days of "auld lang syne"; I was lost in pained bewilderment.

Not even the smell was the same. Something diabolic, or at least carbolic, had expelled it for ever. It was as though some pompous literary County Council, inflated with its own importance, bursting with schemes of improvement, breathing household laws, radiating ardour for the people's good (for which the people are scandalously taxed), had descended upon this erstwhile happy realm with their rampant Radical besom and swept it ruthlessly into oblivion. It had gone the way of Booksellers' Row, that *Paradise Lost* of my youth. I wandered dismally through these transfigured halls, gazed

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helplessly upon the newly fitted shelves, handled a volume or two in surreptitious fashion, as though fearful of being detected in a felony, and then discreetly and mournfully withdrew. It is a greater and more wonderful bookshop now, and a generation which "knew not Joseph" will clasp it to its heart. But to me it was not the same. I may, perhaps, get used to it in time, but it is very doubtful. It is not the old place I once loved. The old order has changed, and with it has passed the glamour of early years, when the thoughts of youth were long, long thoughts.

CHAPTER II

FIRST FOOTSTEPS IN BOOKLAND

THE books we read when we are children make a deep impression. The mind is plastic then, and takes the impress readily. The imagination is awake ; the sense of wonder is alive ; and life is full of surprises. Books come to us then as a kind of talisman, an *open sesame* to a new world. The books I read before I was sixteen have become an actual part of me. I have read hundreds since, but not one has left so deep a mark as some half-dozen volumes pored over by the hour in those far-off halcyon days.

The first three books of which I have any remembrance are *Holiday House*, *Reading without Tears*, and *Parables from Nature*. In the first of these, a fearsome encounter with a mad bull is all that remains upon my mind. The second was a collection of highly moral stories in very large print, of which I retain only a hazy remembrance, the most impressive thing to my very youthful mind being the title, which struck me as being both beautiful and pathetic in a wholly indefinable way, and more than once affected me (for some inscrutable reason)

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to the very emotion it was designed to banish. The third was my favourite, and Mrs. Alfred Gatty was for some time enthroned as a goddess. Her knowledge of Natural History appeared to me profound, and the authentic conversations she overheard among butterflies, caterpillars, frogs, and glow-worms, were positively uncanny. What the Weathercock said to the Sundial seemed to me a masterpiece of veracious narrative.

But the first real "event" in my literary career was *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Strange, perhaps, that it should be so, for *The Pilgrim's Progress* was frankly understood to be "a Sunday book," and was only produced on Sunday afternoons in order to act as a charm towards the preservation of Sabbatic peace. It certainly had that effect, for although "a Sunday book," the spell of Bunyan was sufficient to overcome all the unregenerate emotions aroused by that hateful phrase. The moment I opened the book and saw the quaint illustrations, and began to read the strong simple Saxon—what I believe is called "nervous English"—I was safe till tea-time, and could be left without fear to my own devices. *Giant Despair* was a great "pal" of mine; and an illustration of *Giant Pope*, sitting with a disconsolate countenance at the mouth of a cave biting his nails, was to me the summit of pictorial art. The immortal page whereon is writ the delectable incident of "the stinking dungeon" is dim to this day with the persistent imprint of grimy thumbs and fingers. As for Apollyon, he was placed high upon

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my list of heroes ; and a picture of him, with smoke issuing from his belly and fire from his mouth and nostrils, will be found graven upon my heart when I die.

After Bunyan came Ballantyne. One of those mysterious but delightful persons who sometimes cross the pathway of ingenuous youth—a friend of the family, but to the boy an obscure but congenial unknown, who dispenses half-crowns with lavish hand—presented me on my birthday with *The Coral Island*, and I read that book until I knew it by heart. It described the adventures of three boys on a coral island in the Pacific Ocean, and I knew Jack, Ralph, and Peterkin better than I knew my own schoolmates. They were veritable human beings, and I prayed nightly for their welfare, and implored a kind Heaven to permit me to be wrecked with them also upon some convenient occasion. It is a great boys' book. The incident of the *Diamond Cave* is embedded in my mind, and I could re-tell it at the age of Methusaleh.

Then one day came a silvery shaft of light from the Orient and filled me with the dreamy romance of strange lands lit with large, low moons, balmy with spices, feathery with palms, baggy with Turkish trousers, fragrant with Turkish tobacco, doubtful with Turkish morals, succulent with Turkish delight. I blessed the Sultan for his stern decree, and I blessed Scheherezade for her inventive manner of evading it. *Aladdin*, *Sinbad the Sailor*, *The Forty Thieves*, and *The Porter and the Three Ladies of*

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Bagdad were the realities of existence, while the butcher, the baker, the postman, and the housemaid (whom I met daily) were mere shadows.

About the same time *Robinson Crusoe* arrived upon the scene. I knew him with an excessive familiarity. Are there *any* people quite so real as those we meet with in the fiction of our youth? When I walked to school, it was not through paved streets, but through waving groves and on sunlit sands. Through a clearing in the forest I beheld, with sudden horror, the fire of the savages gleaming, and saw them dancing naked round the flames, celebrating some infamous orgy. The prosaic elder declares it was only some men mending the road that I saw, but I know better. To this day I can feel the thrill with which through *Crusoe's* eyes I saw the footprint in the sand, and knew that for me solitude was over. The isle henceforth was haunted.

Close on the heels of *Crusoe* came *Gulliver*. He had not quite the same simple charm as his predecessor. There was a suspicion now and then that he was "coddling" you, and had his tongue in his cheek. He was not an Israelite indeed, in whom there was no guile. Mr. Lemuel *Gulliver* was out for the day to relate his adventures, and like many adventurers was an expert with the long-bow. *Crusoe* was a simple and devout soul in comparison. I know, for I have lived with him. But though *Gulliver* was a liar, he was a really magnificent liar; and, like those innocent folk who deprecate scandal, but thrive on it, one hovered near him in a pleasing

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flutter of excitement, wondering what he was going to say next.

Then Captain Nemo appeared in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, with his mysterious submarine that ran through the hulls of vessels and sunk them, as easily as a needle through sail-cloth. Many an enchanted hour did I sit in the wonderful saloon of *The Nautilus*, watching the gambols of the strange creatures of the deep through the plate-glass windows in that remarkable vessel; and listened to the melancholy strains of Captain Nemo's organ pulsing through the corridors; and wandered in the weirdly beautiful coral cemetery; and witnessed the terrific slaughter of the octopi; and waited in awe-struck silence for the impact of the steel ram that was to pierce some doomed ship and send her to her death. An absorbing tale, and to an imaginative boy irresistible.

This brought me to the threshold of the classics; and when my father gave me *Pickwick*, I was henceforth a slave to Dickens; and when I discovered an old copy of Shakespeare and read *Hamlet*, it marked a transition stage in my mental history. *Sam Weller* and the *Melancholy Dane* opened two new wings, so to speak, in the palace of my brain, and fresh guests came clamouring for hospitality.

There are but few occasions in reading when one feels the authentic thrill of inspiration. I can recall three. The first was a thrill of surprise. It came in *Robinson Crusoe*, at the moment when Crusoe comes suddenly upon the footprint in the sand. I remember how, on reading that, my boy's heart stood still a

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second and then began thumping like a sledgehammer. It was not reading, it was adventure. I was actually there. For the time being I, too, was clothed in goat-skins, and was scouring my island with interest and wonder. Hitherto I had fondly imagined myself to be alone, and the discovery of this naked footprint struck a chill to my marrow and filled my mind with the gloomiest forebodings. Of course, it could only mean savages; there was no doubt about that. And that could only mean—well, there are some things upon which it is better not to dwell. Enough to remark that somebody would probably enjoy a good and cheap repast; but not I.

The second was a thrill of fear. It occurred in *Treasure Island*, when I heard the tap-tap-tap of Blind Pew's stick along the lonely frozen road. It was a weird, sinister, diabolical business. A more ghostly effect, or one more nicely calculated to strike panic into a boy's veins, could not have been created. At that awful juncture a kind of paralysis seized me. I wanted to throw down the book and leap to my feet, but I was congealed in my chair, "distilled almost to a jelly with the act of fear." It was like the fatal fascination of the serpent's eye. That horrible blind man with the iron grip was coming; I could hear the thud of his groping staff growing louder every moment; I wanted to arise and flee, and all I could do was to clutch the arms of my chair in stricken desperation. It was a kind of mental vertigo. Even now, when I read the passage, the vividness of my feelings on that first perusal recurs

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to me, and I cannot help lingering over the grisly page like an epicure over a favourite dish.

The third was a thrill of beauty. It lies hid in the immortal passage from *Lavengro*. "Life is sweet, brother." "Do you think so?" "Think so!—There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother, who would wish to die?" . . . "In sickness, Jasper?" "There's the moon and the stars, brother." "In blindness, Jasper?" "There's the wind on the heath, brother." The words come into the narrative so unexpectedly. The scholar-gipsy comes suddenly upon a man sitting on the heath. It is his old acquaintance, Jasper Petulengro. Then ensues the brief dramatic dialogue, of which the above forms a part. I recollect that when I first read the passage. I laid the book down, closed my eyes, and repeated the words over and over in a kind of ecstasy. The effect was indescribable. Yet even now I cannot tell what it is in the passage that is so affecting. One might doubtless analyze it, but I refuse to make the attempt. One can only dissect the dead, and this palpitates with life. It is the stuff of which poetry is made, as beautiful and elusive as the will-o'-the-wisp. Imagination claims it for its own.

Pagan, you say? No doubt: Jasper Petulengro had no belief in a hereafter. His father and mother have died since Lavengro and he last met, and he deems death to be the end of man. "More's the pity," says he. "Why do you say so?" asks his

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comrade. And then follow the exquisite sentences quoted. Such paganism is at least better than any religion that despises life and sees no glory in this present world.

“Great God ! I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn ;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn ;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea ;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.”

The beauty of the whole thing is that, despite the darkness of the end, Jasper found life here to be fair and well worth the living. It would never have occurred to him to ask, “Is life worth living?” To him the question would be blasphemy. “Life is sweet, brother.” “Do you think so?” “*Think so ! . . .*” I like that reiterated “Think so !” There is something explosive about it—indignant, emphatic, almost contemptuous. Who but a fool would ask whether life is really sweet, while night and day are making history, while sun, moon, and stars are writing poetry, while a wind on the heath sweeps all cobwebs from the brain ?

Some men who have no belief in a Hereafter lose all faith in the Here; they take as their frivolous motto, “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.” I have heard even religious folk say that if they knew they were to die in a year, they would spend that year having “a good time,” which, being vulgarly but truly interpreted, means that they would “go on the bust.” That is a far deeper and darker paganism than Jasper Petulengro’s. It is a poisonous growth.

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Jasper found life sweet, but he would not make it sordid. He loved it for its health and sanity and beauty. A return to Nature with him did not mean a return to nastiness, but a bracing worship of the bright, the wholesome, and the clean. A conversation like this could never emanate from a complex civilization. We who spend our dull days amid bricks and mortar, doing what we are pleased to call business, cannot understand this attitude towards life. We think it silly, sentimental, impossible, unpractical. Be it so. It is our own sore loss. Stocks, mines, and shares mean more to us than sun, moon, and stars.

Persons who dwell habitually beneath solid roofs and within four solid walls have no notion of the real sweetness of life. Such persons may indeed wish to die. No man with a wholesome soul really wishes to die; and to have a wholesome soul one must be a lover of the open, a devotee of Nature, a worshipper of Mother Earth. I do not wonder at the ages of the Patriarchs: they knew something about the wind on the heath. I recall that lovely passage in Richard Jefferies: "No one else seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook, or heard the music at the hatch, or to have felt back through the centuries. . . . No one seems to understand how I got food from the clouds, nor what there was in the night, *nor why it is not so good to look at it out of window.*" Jefferies would have understood Jasper; they are kindred spirits. The mischief with us is that we are content to look at the world out of

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window, generally with the window shut. The secret of life does not come so. Wordsworth did not write his poetry by lamplight; it came to him as he rambled over the heathy Quantocks with Coleridge, or strolling in Cumberland dales, or musing on the margin of quiet lakes, or climbing the crests and ridges of the hills. The result is that his is the poetry that heals; it is serene with an inviolable peace.

A cynical friend of mine says that it is easy enough to talk about the flowers and the stars when you have five thousand a year. To this I give an unequivocal denial. Great possessions do not rouse the poet in the breast; they usually smother him. Jasper was not a millionaire; he was a gipsy. I have found the keenest appreciation of life's sweetness and beauty among people of very humble origin and with a very small balance in the bank. Their bank is generally a teapot or the foot of an old stocking. When a man has five thousand a year it is not at all easy to talk about sun, moon, and stars; it is easier to talk of the races and motors and Monte Carlo. And as *Bagshot* remarks: "The lights of the Casino put out the stars!" Yes, yes—but "In sickness, Jasper?" "There's the moon and the stars, brother." "In blindness, Jasper?" "There's the wind on the heath, brother." He allows for everything. Accidents cannot disturb him. Civilization has not invaded the sanctuary of his heart. He has reached the quiet seats above the thunder.

Writing of these first footsteps in Bookland re-

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minds me that history repeats itself. There is a volume in our house that goes by the name of *The Beast Book*. It is the property of my youngest son, to whom it is the sum of wisdom and the joy of life. He cannot read as yet, and his four-year-old tongue performs the quaintest pranks in trying to make known his wants or in opening the flood-gates of his heart. Like all children, he has a mania for stories, and he loves being read to ; and if a tale, a page, a paragraph, a sentence, specially appeals to his nimble fancy, he will have that tale, page, paragraph, sentence, repeated until the reader feels the premonitory symptoms of madness.

I was roused from slumber not long ago by these lines :

“ Marching down the street they come,
Fife and cornet, pipe and drum.”

I heard them again and again : they sounded like the tramp of an army. My wife was the victim this time, and she was repeating these lines with the patience of a saint, yet with the emphasis of desperation. In time the repetition became mechanical, and with fixed, unseeing eye and automatically moving lips, she expelled the distracting syllables as if worked by a wire.

My son has many tattered volumes in his choice library, but *The Beast Book* easily holds first place in his affections. For myself, I mourn the day that introduced it beneath my roof. It was a Christmas present from one of a horde of adoring aunties, and a more thoughtless gift could not be imagined.

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Temperament was not considered ; consequences were not thought of. Many a time since that book came into our house I have been moved like Job to open my mouth and curse my day. My son has a soul that seems knit in some mysterious fashion with the whole animal kingdom. He is in league with the beasts of the field, and will certainly be present at that rapturous moment when the lion lies down with the lamb. Conceive a young gentleman of four, clad in microscopic green breeks with jersey to match, who talks animals all day and thinks that heaven and the Zoo are one ; whose last thoughts at night linger lovingly on elephants, and whose first thoughts at dawn burst into broken and imperfect speech concerning the hippopotamus ; whose walks abroad are inconceivably lengthy and distressing, owing to his wanting to stand on kerbstones to watch every horse, and to be lifted on to walls and fences to see every cow and pig and sheep ; and it will at once be perceived that the gift of a *Beast Book* would be like the putting of a match to powder. It was.

The Beast Book is profusely illustrated, and contains about fifty short chapters on as many different animals. The peculiarity of the book is that each animal is made to tell its own story, to describe its own characteristics ; and in several cases two or three beasts of a species are brought together in deep and intimate converse. These dramatic conversations afford the richest delight to the enamoured youth. I believe I could pass a respectable examina-

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tion in beasts of all sorts, shapes, and sizes. I know more about elementary zoology in three months than I have ever known in my previous life-time. I have read *The Beast Book* to its owner at all hours of the day, and its graphic sentences have stuck in my brain and recurred suddenly at all manner of odd, inconvenient, and highly embarrassing moments.

By far the worst time for reading aloud is the morning, especially the early morning. The hour of 7, or even 6, a.m. is the hour at which the owner of *The Beast Book* awakes; the volume is lying handy on the counterpane or beneath his pillow, ready for instant reference. A lamentable characteristic of the owner is his ability to awake all over, so to speak, and all at once. He requires no decent interval for meditation. He has no somnolent moments on waking during which to rub his eyes and yawn and scratch his head and gaze at the ceiling, and gradually come to full possession of his senses. There is nothing whatever of this maturer pantomime belonging to him. When he wakes, he wakes fully; bursts into completeness of being at a bound; sits bolt upright in bed on the instant; and, with eyes as open and blue as the sea, stares blandly at the morning. Immediately also the strings of his tongue are loosed. He requests to know things as soon as his eyes are open. His thirst for miscellaneous information burns the moment his head rises from his pillow. Profound theological questions have startled me from my slumbers between six and seven. Queries which would stagger philo-

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sophers, and demand for light upon matters which angels desire to look into, have sounded clamorously at my bedside at unholy hours, filtering slowly through the mists of sleep into my drowsy brain. I cannot awake immediately. I have to do it by instalments. The days when I could bound from bed like a cannon-ball on the instant of waking are gone beyond recall. I must have a quarter of an hour at least to come to myself after the weird adventures of the night.

But the worst of all the requests that come to my heavy ears in these early morning hours is that I will read *The Beast Book*. It is not a polite suggestion ; it is a demand, an autocratic decree, enforced occasionally with a thump upon the ribs or a great round chubby face lifted against mine. The volume is thrust into my limp hand. I manage to unglue one lack-lustre eye, and begin to read in muffled tones. The book opens abruptly with a conversation between the Gorilla and the Chimpanzee. I commence, breathing heavily : "How very like a man I look," said the Gorilla. "I have thirty-two teeth, and a broad flat chest. I don't wear a tail, and I am called a man-like ape." It is incredible how sentences like these imprint themselves on the brain in this semi-conscious state. The repetition of them morning by morning for several weeks has almost changed my individuality. I find myself wildly impersonating all manner of birds, beasts, and fishes, and imparting various and incredible information about my personal habits. I dread lest

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in some moment of bestial obsession I should greet some astonished friend with the solemn words: "I don't wear a tail . . . my teeth are made to gnaw . . . I am a rodent . . . I have twelve stomachs, and I feed upon my hump . . . I am a pouched animal . . . I am an odd-toed beast—I have only three toes!" This is too dreadful to contemplate, and my only hope is that the owner of *The Beast Book* will soon transfer his affections to another volume.

CHAPTER III

THE COMRADESHIP OF BOOKS

THERE are many styles of writing, as many as the men and women who write, but style may be divided roughly into two—the conversational and the literary. A book written in a literary style may be more enduring, but a book that talks to you is a book that touches the heart. The first excites admiration, the second arouses gratitude. Classic expression is often very beautiful and telling, but somehow it is not friendly ; it seems aloof, remote, cold. Homely words and phrases, quaint turns of thought, abrupt sentences, sudden excursions from the main theme, the charm of surprise—these leave a more lasting impression on the mind than a manner of writing that goes on and on with a steady tramp of sentences in an undeviating march to a desired goal. One could not read Dr. Johnson's rolling ponderosity for any length of time, but one could listen to his talk for ever.

There are some men who have the rare power of writing as they speak, with the result that their personality is conveyed miraculously to the printed page ; and we feel as if we were holding conversation with

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a friend rather than reading a book. These are the books we come to love and cherish. Charles Lamb is such a writer. In quite another vein Emerson is one. Such writing is far from easy. Both Lamb and Emerson were in the habit of polishing their work, and taking infinite pains with it. To write a true talking book is indeed more difficult than to write a literary one. To write colloquially is by no means the same as to write carelessly. Slipshod and slovenly methods will secure neither gratitude nor immortality.

The wonder of a *talking book* is its infinite suggestiveness. In reading Emerson, I find myself pausing a dozen times in a page in order to ponder some provocative paradox or pregnant phrase. Reading a logically progressive author is like walking on a turnpike road to a definite bourne, counting the milestones one by one; but reading a suggestive, provocative, allusive author is like rambling over the hills—at every step there is something fresh to catch the attention, some entrancing view presented to the eye, and one thinks of distance not at all.

For my own part, I value more and more the books that set my own mind at work. It is the same with preachers. There are preachers who take a text, divide it up mechanically, proceed according to the stereotyped rules of homiletics, and present their message in a series of elaborate paragraphs and logical sequences. There are other preachers to whom a text is a window through which they gaze upon an entrancing garden or a spreading

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landscape, and their message comes in a series of surprises. People of precise and geometrical mind complain of such preachers that you never know what they will say next. It seems to me a preposterous criticism. That is the very man I want to hear. Truth to the poet is like a rainbow; to the precisian it is like a line of railway. There are books that simply set the mind racing. They make the world such a large place, and life such a kaleidoscopic thing. That is the power of a book like the Bible, which is pre-eminently a talking book. It has not a pedestrian page in it, save perhaps where a list of unpronounceable names meets the eye; and yet, when you come to think of it, few things are more suggestive than a genealogical tree. The Bible can illumine the earth with a sentence, and open heaven with a phrase.

One of the very best writers of talking books is Charles Lamb. He is essentially a fireside crony, a man to company with by the winter hearth in slippered ease, when the lamp is lit, the curtains are drawn, and the favourite briar is drawing sweetly beneath one's nose. There is not a more entirely lovable author in the whole range of English literature than Elia. He is a master in the art of the unexpected in thought and expression. There is no one else whose style in the least resembles his. It bears the ineffaceable brand of individuality on every page. In the matter of titles alone Lamb is full of quaint surprises. Roast Pig, Chimney Sweeps, Old China, Poor Relations, and Dream Children mingle together

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with perfect propriety within the same covers. Did ever any writer hold his subject with so light a hand as Elia? He is delightfully discursive. His digressions are manifold, and his bypaths are as full of charm as a Devonshire lane or a Scottish glen. Alas! there is no such writing now.

A marvellous thing is this transmission of personality to the printed page. It is impossible for some writers to be anonymous. They cannot write a dozen lines without giving themselves away, so distinctive is their style and method and flavour. Their way of thinking is entirely their own, and we come to look for it and to love it. When a writer has once captured our hearts in this fashion, no amount of adverse comment or searching criticism has power to blunt his appeal or to lower his prestige. Men like Dickens, Lamb, Stevenson, have their detractors, but the men themselves are not affected by the ranging of the critical guns upon them. I have met people who "cannot see anything in Stevenson." What can one do but gaze at them with a pitying eye? A man once told a certain renowned preacher that his sermons always made his head ache. The critic has not spoken to the preacher since the latter put the very pertinent question, "Is that the fault of my sermons or of your head?"

Some personalities are so pronounced that they provoke attention, and perhaps hostility, immediately. Two of the most provoking personalities of the present time are G. K. Chesterton and Bernard Shaw. The perpetual paradoxes of the one and the

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incisive satire of the other are a continual challenge to the reader to "come on." I have heard of a bookseller who declines to deface his counter with Chesterton, and who, when asked for Chesterton's books, recommends Caird's Sermons or Annie Swan. I know an excellent and most kindly man to whom the name of Bernard Shaw is like an intellectual mosquito. "Don't mention that man's name in my presence!" he shouts. "Have you ever read any of his works?" you venture to inquire, mildly and tentatively. And the answer comes like a bombshell: "Never! And what's more, I never mean to read them!" There will be no joy among the angels over this literary sinner repenting.

It is an excellent and friendly rule when one has read a good book to pass it on to somebody else. I do not mean bodily, for lent books, like umbrellas, have an extraordinary affinity with the Prodigal Son, save that they seldom, if ever, return from their wanderings in the far country. But you can at least tell your friends of the books you have enjoyed, though it must be admitted that it requires some temerity to do even this much, on account of the diversity of literary taste. There was a time when I was eager to recommend books to other people, but I have now discontinued the practice. I used to think that what interested me was certain to interest others, but, needless to say, this is a complete delusion. Yet it is natural for youth to imagine that its enthusiasms must be contagious and awaken similar joys and panegyrics in one's friends; it is as natural

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as for a newly accepted lover to suppose that the whole world is thrilling with him in his passion, and to wonder why everyone else is not walking on air. The ecstatic swain passes blithely down the street dreaming fondly of his mistress's eyebrows and hugging his own bliss, and half expects to be stopped at every yard or so to receive the warm congratulations of his fellow-creatures. But the world goes stolidly about its stupid business, and cares nothing for his dreams.

I used to have similar feelings about books. Whenever my heart was captured by a fine story, I wanted everyone else to be smitten with its charms and to share my enthusiasm. But ever since the gloomy day when an intelligent young man informed me that he could not read *Pickwick*, and a lady for whose intellect and character I had immense respect told me that on my recommendation she had been reading *Oliver Twist*, and had just managed to "wade through it," I have been afraid to open my lips about the books that have moved me. I cannot bear to have my favourites flouted and despised.

Many intelligent persons are woefully limited in their literary tastes. They have no generous mental hospitality. They have violent prejudices. They are hopelessly parochial. A flatly refuses to read a tale which is not plentifully garnished with Dukes and Earls and Marquises. B will have nothing to do with a book which has any moralizings in it. C cannot stand description. D misses out all the sentimental parts. X is not satisfied unless the

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pages ring with ceaseless action. Y won't have anything to do with a book which does not end happily. Z is impatient of anything epigrammatic or which gives evidence of finished style. Sometimes a man will fall so headlong in love with one particular author that he will read nobody else, and even suggest that all other writers are a set of incapables. Listen to your rampant Meredithian, your red-hot Dickensian, your breathless Stevensonian! They smite the table as they explode their hero upon you. They almost dilate in bulk as they forage for adjectives, and encounter the imminent peril of rhetorical suicide. Their enthusiasm is delightful. But what I complain of is that so many of these ardent lovers are absolutely blind to others' charms; they will not enlarge their literary harem. And how many different opinions there are about the same book! When I read *The Garden of Allah*, by Robert Hichens, it struck me as a spiritual drama set forth with wonderful understanding of the human heart. But some have found it intolerably tedious; some were bored by the magnificent descriptions of the desert; some even found it to be unpleasantly sensual. As far as reading is concerned, I feel inclined to echo the words of dear old Benjamin Goldfinch, and exclaim: "I give up friends!"

I suppose that for real appreciation of a book one must have some kinship with the author's mind—his style, his method, his point of view. There are certain books one can scarcely appreciate to the full unless one has passed through something of the

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experiences they describe. Some of the books of Mark Rutherford are of this kind. No man can have a large cosmopolitan enjoyment of literature unless he be a humanist. He must be able to say with George Dawson: "I do declare that I have not seen a man, woman, or child out of whom I could not get amusement, if not instruction. Under most things divinity can be found; and he who knows not man can know little of God. He has most joy in life who has the most open eyes; who sees the inner man first, before he takes account of the outer garb."

Of course, if you are a man of this large type you will be misunderstood. You will have the Philistines upon you. You will be supposed to be no better than you ought to be. You will be suspected by the "unco guid," and prayed for as a heathen man and a publican. You must bear this reproach with patient, if not with pious, resignation. Such a position is not without its charm, and there are occasions when it is attended with a pleasant excitement. You will at any rate be fortified with one great consolation: you will never be called upon to endure that woe which is said to come upon those of whom all men speak well. On the whole, I think it is a wise thing to resist the temptation to recommend books. Talk about the books that have moved you as much as you like, but don't recommend them. Friendship is rare, and one wants to keep one's friends as long as possible. Why risk spoiling their tempers by obtruding your tastes? I nearly quarrelled with the

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intelligent young man who could not read *Pickwick*. I was ready in those days to smother any man who did not endorse my literary opinions, and for any human being to breathe a word against Dickens was not to be borne in silence. We did not speak for many days. We sent each other to Coventry. In after-life one learns the futility of argument about such things as taste, or indeed about anything at all. It is better in an amicable spirit to agree to differ, and to cherish a profound compassion in one's private bosom.

Still, a book that has made a strong appeal to one person is likely to have some quality which will win a response from at least a few others. But what is a good book? There's the rub. I believe Mrs. Beeton's *Cookery* to be an admirable and indispensable work—no respectable household should be without it—but it is not the kind of volume I am thinking of just now. I am thinking chiefly of stories, ranging from *The Egoist* down to *The Dark Deed of Dead Man's Dingle*. This latter specimen of fiction has never been published, and never will be, but it is nevertheless an actual and indubitable "work." Its manuscript is yellow and faded, and its author looks at it now and then with pensive eyes, as being violently illustrative of a certain vigorous and barbarian stage of his development. The title at least is suggestive, with a crimson lure and an artful alliteration all its own. But stories with titles like that can hardly be called good stories.

A good book must be true to life. This does not

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involve the exclusion of fairy tales, for fairy tales are often the truest things in the world. Indeed, truth to life is the most catholic and all-embracing desideratum that could be named; for there is no fantasy, no imagination, no dream or nightmare, no mystic vision or philosophic thought, no lofty prayer or howling blasphemy, no tearful tragedy or side-splitting farce, that does not emanate from man and so belong to human life. Anything characteristic of man is the novelist's stock-in-trade. Truth to life does not pin the writer down to a limited area; it affords him the utmost liberty and the most engaging variety. People often criticize stories on account of their untruth to life, by which they mean that they have never seen things after that fashion in their own parish. But the longer one lives, the more one discovers that human nature is incalculable; that every man is an odd problem, a separate puzzle, an individual mystery; that men and women are perpetually doing surprising things.

Then I should say that a good book should have living characters. By that I mean that we should be able to recognize them as flesh and blood. So many characters in books are mere pasteboard—penny plain and twopence coloured. It is pleasant to come upon such characters in a book as we meet with every day; we feel the reality of the thing at once; it is like a bit out of our own experience. Yet it is well to remember that our own experience is limited, and that there is many a corner of human nature into which we have not penetrated, and many a

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world of whose colour and meaning we have little or no knowledge.

Civilization itself is but skin-deep, and one only has to scratch it to find the savage. All sorts of primitive passions and emotions lie embedded in very respectable folk who say "Good morning" to each other affably over the breakfast-table, pay their taxes regularly, give a subscription to the missionary society, accomplish their round of work with decency, and die comfortably in their beds in the end. If you go abroad you may light upon a country where the standard of morals is marvellously changed, and where the placid customs of life are all topsy-turvy; and a man who is the very personification of dignity and respectability at home begins to discover undreamed-of propensities and strange affinities with other forms of life. The good book does not regard human nature as having its home and centre in Great Britain, but looks out towards the universal.

Another characteristic of the good book is everyday incident. Here again there is room for infinite variety. Life is a drama of extraordinary subtlety and complexity, and many a grey thread of quiet commonplace meets the gold strand of romance, or may suddenly be crossed by the red line of tragedy, or become entangled in a mesh impossible to unravel. You may sit down intending to write the homely history of a woman in a village, or the quiet chronicle of an ordinary man's life in a city, never anticipating any exciting episode; yet all your intentions may be

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rudely upset before you have written half a dozen chapters. You will find that your characters have a singularly disconcerting habit of getting out of hand and running away with you. That will at any rate prove one thing—namely, that your characters are not mere puppets, but are really alive, which is entirely satisfactory. To sit down and organize a complete plot beforehand, as an architect plans a house, seems to me to be a bungling and mistaken way of going to work. It is too stagey and mechanical altogether. The architecture of real life does not build itself up in such a formal and conventional fashion. You will find that you have to put a blank wall where you intended a window; to throw out a turret where you meant a balcony; to turn a drawing-room into a cellar, a porch into a pantry, a library into a kitchen. The style is mixed and out of proportion; it is Queen Annish, Elizabethan, Georgian, Early Victorian, Gothic, Norman, modern, all at once; the whole building is a medley and a monstrosity. Of course, it is not artistic; but you can't help that. In other words, the house of life is made up of many heterogeneous elements, and your story may be the despair of the critic. It may begin anywhere, proceed incoherently, and end like a great river running out into sandy deltas. From a popular standpoint this would be preposterous; from an artistic standpoint it would be heart-breaking; from a financial standpoint it would be ruinous. But it seems to me it would be very real and true.

A good book should reveal the good as well as the

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bad in human nature—a thing many of our modern writers seem disinclined or unable to do; and it should show that in spite of all appearances good is stronger than evil, and will ultimately be victorious over it. This is the real difference between a moral and an immoral story. An immoral book is not one that deals largely with the seamy side of life, but a book that depicts the seamy side as the chief or the only side, a book that makes vice alluring, a book that is cynical towards the best and sweetest things in life, a book that is written in the seat of the scornful. The *Bonnie Brier Bush* type of story erred on the sugary, sentimental side; the *House with the Green Shutters* type of story erred on the barbarous, callous, brutal side. There is a happy mean which is far truer to reality than either. A book may have much that is dark, sordid, and unpleasant in it, much that reveals the trail of the serpent, and yet it may leave you in love with life, and thoroughly convinced that the world is no blunder and life well worth the living. If a book does that, it is a good and companionable book, though its artistic faults be as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

A very interesting article appeared some time ago in *The Spectator* on the pleasures of re-reading. Among other things the writer says: "We are sometimes ashamed of our dearest book-friends, and do not like to risk our character for literary acumen by saying how much we love them. The feeling is unreasonable. We are not bound to love our human acquaintances in exact ratio to their wit or worth.

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Sympathy counts for more than judgment in matters of affection." There is much truth in this, and it is said excellently well. There is really nothing to prevent our risking our character for literary acumen (if we have such) by exploiting with perfect frankness any of our own prime favourites. The philosophy of the favourite book is a fascinating and remarkable study, and perhaps the only outcome of such a study is, after all, an exclamatory repetition of the dictum, "There's no accounting for tastes." The revelation of taste is full of surprises, and in no department is it more surprising than in our literary predilections. The article already referred to closes with these words: "A library composed of the secret favourites of a score of educated men and women of to-day would offer much food for thought. It would, we believe, be neither very large, nor very new, nor very varied. It would not contain much that is great, except perhaps of lyrical poetry; it would contain much that is commonplace, and very little that is at all eccentric. The ordinary man or woman longs instinctively to see the evident well put, to get that answer to his or her own mental expectancy which the ear gets from a correct scale. We do not often find this primitive satisfaction in real life, and the function of art, in the mind of the ordinary man, is to supply it. He may know better, or rather he may have learned better, but he re-reads in accordance with his instinct, not his training."

It is this, I suppose, that accounts for the fact that it is almost impossible to explain properly why such

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and such a book is a favourite. A man cannot give a reason for an instinct. A man cannot give elaborate and satisfactory reasons for liking oysters or disliking tomatoes; he simply likes them or dislikes them, and there's an end of it. In regard to the comradeship of books, one's preferences or repulsions are often founded upon something too subtle for analysis; or it may be upon something so hopelessly unreasonable as prejudice. A man will sometimes get a fixed idea about a certain author, imbibed probably from floating popular tradition or from the lofty pronouncement of some superior critic, and will henceforth give him a wide berth, without giving the author the benefit of the doubt, or doing him the justice of a personal examination. On the other hand, a man may be suddenly called upon to justify his avowal of a favourite book, and finds to his discomfiture that he has no answer ready. His instinct has laid hold upon the book and instantly and uproariously approved it, but he can by no means discover a set of reasons by which he could uphold his preference before an indifferent, a bigoted, or a critical audience. It may be a question of style, of construction, of narrative power, of description, of scene, of character, of atmosphere, of personality; in any case, it is a characteristic, or a combination of characteristics, which makes a very direct appeal to him, but may make little or none at all to somebody else. We all have our idiosyncrasies in the matter of favourite books; and sometimes they are

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peculiar, even preposterous, perhaps quite indefensible in the midst of a critical and deliberative assembly.

For my own part, I am very liable to be captured by a writer in his opening sentences. I am susceptible to first impressions; and I am sure a speaker or a writer cannot bestow too much attention upon beginnings. This is totally different from those (to me) inexplicable and reprobate persons who invariably look first of all to see how a book ends, and if it does not finish as they desire, refuse to read it. I do not know how people can behave so basely. If I knew what was coming I should not care to read a book at all, save, of course, in the case of books which have become real comrades, when they have licence to repeat themselves *ad lib*. It is the beginning of a book that makes me want to read it, not its end.

Think of an essay, for instance, beginning like this: "A clear fire, a clean hearth, and the rigour of the game! This was the dearest wish of old Sarah Battle (now with God), who, next to her devotions, loved a good game of whist." What an alluring start! No true reader could help following blithely upon such a trail. Or take this for the beginning of a story: "The full truth of this odd matter is what the world has long been looking for, and public curiosity is sure to welcome." Why, the appetite is sharpened at once, and the mention of that "odd matter," so artfully introduced, sets us tingling for adventure. Here is a beginning of quite another

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kind, but equally stimulating: "Of late years, an abundant shower of curates has fallen upon the North of England; they lie very thick on the hills; every parish has one or more of them; they are young enough to be very active, and ought to be doing a great deal of good." Another specimen: "Some years ago a book was published under the title of *The Pilgrim's Scrip*. It consisted of a selection of original aphorisms by an anonymous gentleman, who in this bashful manner gave a bruised heart to the world." Yet a different style: "With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader." Few readers, I imagine, could hesitate long upon this threshold: "This is the story of what a woman's patience can endure, and what a man's resolution can achieve." Here is an opening of a very homely kind: "On an evening in the latter part of May a middle-aged man was walking homeward from Shaston to the village of Marlott, in the adjoining Vale of Blackmoor. The pair of legs that carried him were rickety, and there was a bias in his gait which inclined him somewhat to the left of a straight line." One might pursue this fascinating theme indefinitely, but enough has been said to justify my contention that opening sentences are deserving of special care, and are capable of providing an excellent bait for readers. Friendships are formed in the oddest ways, and one

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is attracted by a voice, an expression, a casual utterance, a fleeting smile. The comradeship of books is often cemented in an equally fortuitous fashion, and a man may find himself a slave for life to an author who draws him strangely in his very first chapter.

CHAPTER IV

IN GREEN PASTURES

IN summer-time one turns from the library to the open air, and if one reads at all, it is books with a breeze in them and with the sunshine on their pages. Problems, pessimism, and the relation of the sexes can be shot into their appropriate dustbin, and we turn to wholesomer fare. It may have happened to certain readers to light upon some volumes bearing these seductive titles: *Red Deer*, *Field and Hedgerow*, *Nature Near London*, *Wood Magic*, *The Open Air*, *The Amateur Poacher*, *The Gamekeeper at Home*. If so, they may count themselves the favourites of fortune, for they have been introduced to Richard Jefferies, and with him they have wandered in the secret places of Nature, picking up strange lore, making friends with birds and animals, trees and flowers, summer clouds and running brooks, shaggy woods and breezy downs, and they have been as happy as sandboys. They have got away from the desk and all restraint, and they have the sensation of playing truant—one of the most wickedly delicious joys in the world.

My first introduction to Jefferies was in *Longman's*

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Magazine—now, alas! defunct, and we no longer meet with lively anticipation *At the Sign of the Ship*, to listen to Andrew the Oracular and the Omnivorous; and there I chanced upon an article bearing the title *My Old Village*. In it there were passages like this: “There used to be clouds over the fields, white clouds in blue summer skies. I have lived a good deal on clouds; they have been meat to me often; they bring something to the spirit which even the trees do not. . . . No one else seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook, or heard the music at the hatch, or to have felt back through the centuries; and when I try to describe these things to them they look at me with stolid incredulity. No one seems to understand how I got food from the clouds, nor what there was in the Night, nor why it is not so good to look at it out of window. They turn their faces away from me, so that perhaps after all I was mistaken, and there never was any such place, or any such meadows, and I was never there.” This was in 1887, and I have that copy of *Longman’s* still, with Jefferies’ article scored with pencil-marks, and from that time he has been for me the magician of the open air.

It is true that many of his books suffer from lack of unity, from repetition, from irrelevant digression—faults which are the inevitable result of articles written to fill a certain exact space in a newspaper or magazine. The chapters which make up many of his books were first written in this way. Yet the books have a charm of their own; they could have

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been written by no one but Jefferies. Other men have written Nature books, but none write like Jefferies. There is a fascination about the man himself which seems to communicate itself to all he writes. It is difficult to say wherein the fascination lies—as difficult as to say wherein inspiration consists; but it is there, and we yield ourselves to it as to a potent spell. Jefferies is not a scientist, a pedant, or a schoolmaster; he has no technical terms, no dry-as-dust methods, no cut-and-dried phrases. His worst fault is a tendency to take an inventory of Nature, as if he were jotting down items for a bill of sale. At his best he is a poet, and the glamour of his vision is over all. He is commonplace and dull at times, and we grow a little weary of his cataloguing; but how much there is to balance this, and to make us go on reading page after page in a quiet glow of enjoyment and satisfaction!

Certain things strike one immediately on reading Richard Jefferies. One is his extraordinary power of observation. Nothing is too minute for him; he seems to see everything. Indeed, it fills me with a sense of shameful incompetence when I reflect that I have so often walked through a country lane, or beside a stream, or through the meadows, and yet have not seen a hundredth part of what this man sees. But he was born with this power of vision, and he spent all his days cultivating it, and he was able to read Nature like a book. The habits of birds, the movements of animals, the characteristics of trees and plants, the configuration of clouds, the

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wonders of the grass, the glory of the open downs, the mysteries of the wood, the life of the field, the homely impressions of the farmyard—all come under his penetrating gaze, and to read him is to tramp the countryside with a comrade one never forgets.

Then there is his extraordinary intimacy with Nature, the direct result of his observation. It is not that he has made Nature the subject of special study; it is rather that he is made one with her. He not only knows her various characteristics; he has felt the beating of her heart. Most of us have to compel ourselves to observe and examine when we go into the country; Jefferies observed and examined like a man who was there for the purpose and could not do anything else. He has told us in that singular and unforgettable confession, *The Story of my Heart*, how deep and real was the bond between himself and Nature. He would pray that the glory of the sun, the beauty of the sky, the sweetness and freshness of the grass, the splendour and purity of the sea, might pass into him and enrich his soul-life. He could hardly help being a Pantheist. God, Nature, and himself were as one soul.

Then there was his equally extraordinary patience. This is characteristic of all naturalists and investigators, but it came to wonderful fruition in Jefferies. He would think nothing of spending a whole day in one place—an idler to all outward seeming, a loafer or a dreamer to the casual passer-by—but in reality with every nerve on the stretch, intently watching

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the movements of the creatures about him. So still he would sit or lie, that birds came and perched on his hat, and timid creatures like the rabbit or the squirrel came and fed close at his feet. He tells us in one passage that a man who is content to stand still for an hour or two under a tree in a forest will see more than if he tramped miles of country throughout a whole day; because the birds and animals will come about him if he remains quiet, whereas the least movement will banish them all to nest and hole and covert. One cannot but be impressed with the beauty and suggestiveness of things as Jefferies sees and describes them. And the thought comes to us: "If only *we* had eyes like this man! And all these wonders are close at hand!" That is the bewildering part of it. All this beauty, this fascination, this suggestion is at our own doors, and there is no need to travel beyond our garden-gate to see miracles and to dream dreams.

A volume of Jefferies usually goes with me on holiday. Even at such fallow seasons I must have a companion in my knapsack. Holiday-reading must of course be light. One can admire but cannot emulate those mental stalwarts who devour Gibbon or tackle *Sordello* by the sad sea waves. Most of us are not tuned up to such intellectual concert pitch when we take our tickets for the coast. On the other hand, we must have something a cut above the tit-bitty order of reading to relieve the tedium of wet days. There are many people who can do without books altogether; they do not feel the want

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of them. They would subscribe gaily to the sentiments of that recreant scribe who wrote :

“ We may live without books ; what is knowledge but grieving ?
We may live without hope ; what is hope but deceiving ?
We may live without love ; what is passion but pining ?
But where is the man who can live without dining ? ”

Such a restaurant troubadour might have been an emissary of the devil, so steeped is he in the poison of cynicism. If a man is a reader at all, he cannot pack his bag without a volume or two among his pyjamas and shaving gear. Even though he may not read them, he knows they are there in case of emergency, and derives comfort from the fact. For many years I carried a perfect library of miscellaneous literature on holiday, but latterly I have reduced the number to about half a dozen. It is true they used to make an imposing row set out along my bedroom mantelpiece, but it is also true that they added appreciably to the weight of my baggage. There are now so many delightful pocket volumes, well printed and bound, a delight to the eye and a pleasure to hold, that there is no excuse for omitting them on the score of weight.

I like to travel with two or three books I have read before. One of Dickens's always comes, probably *Great Expectations*, a tale I have read at least a dozen times, and shall likely read a dozen more. It is not a book one hears referred to as often as some of the other Dickens volumes, but I have always thought it one of his best. It has an absorbing plot, it is crowded with incident and character, it is rich

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in humour, and it is written in a clear and simple style to which Dickens did not always condescend. Then I must have a couple of Stevenson's—*The Ebb-Tide* and *An Inland Voyage*, or *Travels with a Donkey* and a volume of the *Essays*. It is amazing that *The Ebb-Tide* is not more spoken of; in point of style it is one of the greatest things Stevenson ever did. It is melodramatic and impossible; but it contains the imperishable portrait of that incomparable little cad Huish, and the wonder of the South Seas is over all. One can feel the tropic heat as one reads of how "the pitch bubbled in the seams" of the schooner *Farallone*, and the witchery of that land of enchantment among the coral reefs is wonderfully conveyed. There is a striking bit of psychological description, too, of a man trying to commit suicide by drowning, and he finds himself automatically and continuously swimming, unable to throw up his hands and disappear. Then I think I shall put in *Shirley* and *Richard Feverel*—both among the immortals. Who that has read it can ever forget the loves of Richard and Lucy as they wander by the weir? No more idyllic love scene has ever been pictured than the chapter headed "A Diversion on a Penny Whistle." It is the very poetry and romance of passion.

My fellow-travellers among the poets vary with the place of residence at holiday-time. If the district is mountainous, Wordsworth is indispensable. If I go to the sea, I take Byron; his stormy, impetuous spirit seems to chime with the foaming

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billows. Tennyson has journeyed with me many times, and I have read Cowper and Coleridge amid some of their own haunts. There is a rich delight in reading poetry out of doors, on a hill-side, in a wood, in a boat upon a lake, by the side of a running stream, on a moor where the heather blooms and the curlews cry and a vast arch of sky bends above. Under such conditions one seems to get into better tune with the poet's thought, and to enter into the rhythm and music of his speech. Since the return of the poets to Nature their work can be best enjoyed under the sky rather than under a ceiling. One can read Milton in the study, but Wordsworth and Burns must be read out of doors. The true poet is made one with Nature, and nothing human is alien to his purpose. He touches the Universal, and every living thing he sees wakes his heart to song. It is he who understands the Secret which others so grievously misinterpret. There are some lines by Bret Harte, of which I am very fond, which express what I mean :

"Over the chimney the night wind sang,
And chanted a melody no one knew ;
And the Woman stopped, as her babe she tossed,
And thought of the one she had long since lost,
And said, as the tear-drops back she forced,
'I hate the wind in the chimney !'

"Over the chimney the night wind sang,
And chanted a melody no one knew ;
And the Children said, as they closer drew,
'Tis some witch that is cleaving the black night through,
'Tis a fairy trumpet that just then blew,
And we fear the wind in the chimney !'

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“Over the chimney the night wind sang,
And chanted a melody no one knew ;
And the Man, as he sat by his hearth below,
Said to himself, ‘ It will surely snow,
And fuel is dear and wages are low,
And I’ll stop the leak in the chimney !’

“Over the chimney the night wind sang,
And chanted a melody no one knew ;
And the Poet listened and smiled,
For he was Man and Woman and Child,
And said, ‘ It is God’s own harmony,
This wind I hear in the chimney !’ ”

“For he was Man and Woman and Child!” That is why the poet can gather into a whole that of which most of us can only see the fragments.

It is a charming experience to visit the actual scene of a poet’s birth, or the place where a great poem was conceived. I have long planned a series of pilgrimages to poetical shrines, but have only been able so far to carry it out very partially. In the county of Devon, a little over a mile outside the lovely village of Lynton, there is a remarkable bit of wild natural scenery called *The Valley of Rocks*. It would be easy for me, perhaps, to exaggerate its grandeur, for the whole neighbourhood is associated with the glorious golden days of my boyhood. My earliest impressions of the wonder and beauty and mystery of Nature were derived from *The Valley of Rocks*. I have seen it under all manner of conditions—bathed in sunshine, wrapped in mist, shrouded with clouds, wild with wind, shimmering and crackling with heat, hidden in driving rain—it

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is wonderful in all. There is a magnificent approach to it by way of the *North Walk*, a narrow pathway cut in the side of a hill, seven or eight hundred feet above the sea, and looking sheer down to the water.

A mile along this romantic path brings you to a sudden opening between the hills, and you find yourself introduced without warning into *The Valley of Rocks*. The place looks as if an earthquake had upheaved it or a tempest had blasted it, or as if it were the scene of a battle of giants. Huge rocks are scattered everywhere, some piled one upon another in fantastic pyramid, some poised upon a dizzy eminence, some overhanging in grey crags and moss-grown bastions, some having the appearance of a ruined castle of immemorial age. From the giddy height of one of the rocks a notable smuggler is said to have leapt into the sea, hundreds of feet below. Within the ominous shadow of the Castle Rock you may still see the remains of *Mother Meldrum's Kitchen*, an aged and mysterious crone, who told fortunes and launched curses and drew horoscopes and made prophecies (on unreasonable terms), and earned a sinister reputation as a witch. Half a mile beyond is Lee Abbey, one of the most charming country dwellings in England, with a reputation of being haunted. Within the area of the valley are several articles belonging to the devil—*The Devil's Cheese Wring*, *The Devil's Punch Bowl*—and other Satanic properties. Altogether a delectable and romantic region.

Hither in 1797 came two young men on a walking

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tour, having heard of the fame of the valley, and anxious to behold its beauty and grandeur for themselves. No one who saw them at that time, tramping the red roads of Devon in animated talk, would have guessed that they were destined to make their names famous in the literature of the world. When William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge set out on their tour from Alfoxden to *The Valley of Rocks*, they themselves hardly realized that their walk was to be productive of such momentous issues. Yet so it was. It was autumn when they tramped the Somerset and Devon lanes, a season when the West Country is at its best. The whole landscape is bathed in the afterglow of summer. The best of the heather is over, but a deep rich purple still lingers on the open moors; the valleys are bronzed with the changing bracken; the streams that go singing and brawling over stones and boulders are swollen and tawny with the rains; the sunsets fling more gorgeous colours on the evening skies; the orchards are ruddy with apples; the roads are a richer red through the heavier dews and the draining moisture of the hills. At evening the rising of the large, round, yellow harvest moon from behind the hill-tops seems to bathe the landscape in a supernatural splendour. There could be no spot in England and no season better fitted to appeal to the mystical and the imaginative; and one can understand Wordsworth and Coleridge being wrought to a high pitch of poetic rapture and enthusiasm by the enchantment of the place and the time.

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It was under such circumstances that *The Lyrical Ballads* were projected. As the two poets walked together they discussed the possibilities of a volume of poems, to which each of them should make contribution in characteristic vein. Wordsworth was to deal with the simple natural scenes of everyday experience, with characters and incidents selected from the ordinary life of a country village. Coleridge was to provide the more romantic element, and to throw a mystical glamour over certain carefully chosen incidents in such a way as to invest them with the reality of human interest. Wordsworth wrote the larger part of the volume, but Coleridge immortalized it and himself by contributing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *The Dark Ladie*, and the first part of *Christabel*. It is a prosaic thought enough that the initial intention of such a volume was to raise £5 in order to defray the expenses of their walking tour. In such deadly practical fashion did some of the richest treasures of English verse come into being. The poets were hard up; they could not afford an expensive holiday; so they agree upon a tramp, and project a joint volume of poems to raise the wind to cover their jaunt. It is a living illustration of the very principle the two poets desired to embody in their book—the combining of the natural with the supernatural. The frozen necessity of raising £5—there is the natural. The kindling of genius into immortal verse—there is the supernatural. If it be not the supernatural, it is at all events the inexplicable.

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The little volume thus produced has had an extraordinary effect upon certain types of mind. It has been to many nothing less than an intellectual emancipation, a new birth into larger liberty, a discovery of wider spiritual horizons. The change that has come upon the life of such sympathetic and responsive readers has been well described in *Mark Rutherford's Autobiography*. He declares himself as being untouched during the first two years of his college life by anything he heard, read, or did. But in his third year at college he happened to find amongst a parcel of books a volume of poems in paper boards. "It was called *Lyrical Ballads*, and I read first one and then the whole book. It conveyed to me no new doctrine, and yet the change it wrought in me could only be compared with that which is said to have been wrought on Paul himself by the Divine apparition. Looking over the *Lyrical Ballads* again, as I have looked it over a dozen times since then, I can hardly see what it was which stirred me so powerfully, nor do I believe that it communicated much to me which could be put into words. But it excited a movement and a growth which went on till, by degrees, all the systems which enveloped me like a body gradually decayed from me and fell away into nothing." It was like a hand of healing laid upon a tortured mind, bringing the gift of peace. Henceforth God dwelt not in theological books or ecclesiastical rites, but "on the downs in the far-away distances, and in every cloud-shadow which wandered across the valley." And so, says Rutherford, "Words-

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worth unconsciously did for me what every religious reformer has done—he recreated my supreme divinity, substituting a new and living spirit for the old deity, once alive, but gradually hardened into an idol.” The walking tour of the two poets in Devon and Somerset has had the result of opening the prison to them that are bound, and setting at liberty them that are bruised.

It is not only the poets who belong essentially to green pastures, but also the essayists. It has always seemed to me that the true essayist is not a man of the library, but a man of the open. He is a man who ought to be able to write upon any subject. The more weighty it is, the more sententious and oracular his manner; the more trivial it is, the more inventive his fancy and the more tricky his style. Swift wrote an essay on a Broomstick, and he certainly adorned the theme. The man who has a real genius for essay-writing is never at a loss for a subject. A young and innocent reporter is said to have asked his editor what he should write about, and his chief told him abruptly to write on the first thing that came to hand. That evening the ingenious youth sent in an article on Door-Knobs. The essayist should imagine himself to be consulted on all manner of topics, and to be quite equal to supplying complete information on them all.

I met a man a summer or two ago who would have made a splendid essayist. He had the right temperament. A friend and I were touring in Devon, and we stopped in front of a village inn to

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admire a distant view of Dartmoor. As we stood entranced with the marvellous deep purple of the desolate moor, a tipsy voice behind us began to sing out, "What—d'you want—to—know—sir? What—d'you want—to know—sir?" And having repeated the sentiment about half a dozen times, as if he were practising an anthem, the voice broke into a rollicking peal of Falstaffian laughter. This jovial being imagined that we were in need of local information, and, brimful of beery good nature, he was bursting to supply it. That unctuous laugh of his will ring in my ears for many a day. I turned to look at him as he sat on a rude bench beneath the tap-room window, his face beaming with fun, his voice booming forth at intervals: "What—d'you want—to know—sir?" and then breaking into uproarious merriment, and I thought: Here is the true oracle; here is the real humanist; no matter who or what the traveller, he need not lack for honest company and genial wit and cyclopædic discourse. He had the essayist's temper!

The essay is one of the most delightful of all literary forms when it is well handled, and it has been the chosen vehicle for the expression of some of the finest minds and most charming writers in the language. The names of Bacon, Macaulay, Montaigne, Hazlitt, Lamb, Leigh Hunt, Johnson, Goldsmith, Addison, Emerson, Lowell, Stevenson, and many more, are sufficient guarantee of the pre-eminence of the essay: the mere mention of them revives a hundred happy memories. It is like wan-

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dering in a garden full of flowers and shelter and fountains. To many of us the essay makes a specially familiar appeal, not unmixed with pathetic and painful recollections ; because it is the mould into which we strove to pour our crude and confused thoughts when we made our first bashful and twittering appearance before a Literary Society or a Young People's Guild. That was the hilarious and roseate period when we thought we had a message for mankind. We realized that the times were out of joint, and, unlike the brooding Dane, we had a solemn and immovable conviction that we were destined to set them right. Our brain-pan was bubbling and seething with a weltering mass of ideas on literary, political, social, and religious matters, not excluding many things which angels desire to look into, and at the urgent request of a local secretary we took the lid off and allowed the startled members of the society a glimpse within. Since that memorable day we have regarded the essay with a sneaking affection. If we have not been able to march abreast with the Immortals, we have at least panted heavily in their wake ; and it is something to feel that one has been in that glorious procession, though at the tail end of it.

Among the charming company of the essayists the name of Alexander Smith occupies no mean place. He is not, perhaps, in the very first flight, but he has a distinction of his own. His *Dreamthorp* is a capital example of the essay form. There is one paper in it *On the Writing of Essays*, and there are

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certain detached sentences in that paper which give us in succinct form the author's own idea of what an essay is and what an essayist should try to do. Let me quote two or three: "The essay, as a literary form, resembles the lyric, in so far as it is moulded by some central mood—whimsical, serious, or satirical. . . . The essayist is a chartered libertine, and a law unto himself. . . . His main gift is to discover the suggestiveness of common things; to find a sermon in the most unpromising texts. . . . A modest truthful man speaks better about himself than about anything else, and on that subject his speech is likely to be most profitable to his hearers. . . . It is this egotism, this perpetual reference to self, in which the charm of the essayist resides. . . . If the egotist is weak, his egotism is worthless. If the egotist is strong, acute, full of distinctive character, his egotism is precious, and remains a possession of the race."

It is only justice to Alexander Smith to say that he very admirably succeeds in embodying his own ideal. *Dreamthorp* is full of excellent things said excellently well. The style is clear and flowing like a stream, and there is many a touch of poetry and imagination, like the patches of colour and the whispering reeds and grasses that beautify its banks. The book is full of happy descriptive touches, quaint conceits, suggestive phrases, tender reflections, pathetic and humorous musings. It is discursive, sometimes inconsequent, occasionally garrulous; but these are the natural prerogatives of the essayist,

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and constitute part of his charm. There is just sufficient egotism in it to impart a distinctive personal flavour, and to give it that feeling of intimacy which is so attractive and appealing to the reader.

Alexander Smith has the delightful art, which all the best essayists have, of quietly taking the reader into his confidence. He does not always stick to his subject, but nobody expects him to. We do not go to an essayist to be caught in a chain of logical reasonings; we go to him to be led in green pastures and beside still waters, to wander in the bypaths of thought, to gather nosegays of every colour, to reflect on the pathos and sublime of human life, to toss our thought hither and thither like children playing at ball, to calm our mind or to stimulate it, to indulge in a quiet talk as with a familiar friend. For the best essays are talking-books, and to read them is to feel as if one were closeted with some bosom crony with a pipe by the fireside, exchanging ideas or reviving reminiscences. *Dreamthorp* is "A Book of Essays written in the Country." I like that sub-title. It brings with it a flavour of clover-scented fields, and a glimpse of hedge-bordered lanes, and of villages sleeping in the sunshine. I see the tapering spires and the ivy-clad towers of country churches, and hear the rooks a-cawing in the elms. There are twelve essays in the book. The author discourses in meditative strain on *Dreamthorp* itself, its scenery and its characters; on the Writing of Essays; on Death and the Fear of Dying; on the Flight of a Lark; on Christmas; on Men of Letters; on

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A Shelf in My Bookcase; on Books and Gardens; on Vagabonds; on Chaucer and Dunbar; on the Importance of a Man to Himself. Pleasant subjects, for the most part, treated in a happy and suggestive manner. A book for all the year; for the summer garden or the winter fire; but chiefly for quiet resting-places in the open, where the breeze is gentle and the sun is warm.

CHAPTER V

BESIDE STILL WATERS

THERE are certain Byways in Bookland that lead one in meditative frame beside still waters. I have often carried in my pocket a small volume bearing the title, *A Little Book of Life and Death*. It was first published in 1902, and since then it has passed through nearly a score of editions. The fact is significant, for the little book is a book of consolation. That such a book should prove so popular means two things: that life is to most people a mystery, a battle, a daily temptation, anxiety, sorrow, or pain; and that because this is so, men and women have great and continual need of counsel and guidance, encouragement and sympathy, and are always eager to welcome it.

Many such books as these are published now, and the best and most comprehensive of them command a wide and ready sale. This little book is a careful and catholic compilation from many widely different writers. The extracts are brought together by Miss Elizabeth Waterhouse. The world is full of sources from which we may draw strength and hope and encouragement if we are really and truly in search

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of these things. The compiler says in her short preface: "In gathering together this little bundle of thoughts on life of which we know so little, and death of which we guess in vain, I have seldom gone to seek them for the purpose of this book, but have chiefly followed the pencil-marks and dogs'-ears of many happy years." It would be a very useful and helpful thing for every man who reads to make a book of striking extracts for himself, culled from the various reading of the years.

For those who are seeking for truth; for those who are striving after a clean and honest life; for those who are making some endeavour to live near to the reality of things; especially for those who are persuaded of the existence of spiritual reality, and believe in the strength to be derived from contact and communion therewith—such a little volume as this seems to me to be of very great value. Its value lies largely in its brevity, in its variety, and in its suggestiveness. In its Brevity, for ours is a day of haste and hurry and turmoil, and the majority have but little leisure to study large and comprehensive books that deal more or less exhaustively with great themes and difficult problems. We have to be arrested swiftly, caught on the wing. We need telegrams of inspiration rather than essays of it. A single sentence that strikes the mind like an arrow and sticks, is better than a treatise that taxes every effort, and is mostly forgotten when finished. Such a book as Miss Waterhouse has compiled provides a quiverful of such arrows.

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Its value lies also in its variety. The truths contained here are drawn from all sources—from poets, prose-writers, mystics, prophets, saints, and pagans—all with a religious end and aim and flavour. The writers are cosmopolitan. They have no particular axe to grind, no special cause to plead, no peculiar doctrine to expound. They look abroad upon the multitudinous needs of human life, and make a universal appeal. They belong to that select company of men and women who look into their own hearts and write, “and a man cannot touch his neighbour’s heart with anything else than his own.” The majority of the writers have paid the price of their wisdom in perplexity and suffering and pain, and their wisdom may therefore be received with gratitude and confidence as the fruit of a very real experience.

The book also has a value in its suggestiveness. These are truths expressed in epigrams, poems, short paragraphs, detached sentences, not all complete in themselves, but suggesting more than they express. They stimulate one’s own thought, set one’s own brain in motion, kindle one’s own imagination, and this is as rich a service as any book can perform.

Ours is an age of pocket volumes, and for my part I owe a debt of gratitude to their promoters. I have often carried this *Little Book of Life and Death* with me on a railway journey, on a cycle ride, or on a country ramble. It is one of the most delightful things in the world, one of the simplest and sweetest of joys, to sit on a bank by the roadside, or on a

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country stile, or in the shade of some friendly tree in field or wood, and read a page or two in some treasured pocket volume. I like to get a happy and steadying thought at the beginning of the day. After the strange adventures of the night, I come up to the surface of consciousness like a diver emerging from dim and perilous depths, and I want something to take hold of when entering upon the history of a new day. I want to get my mind in tune for the fresh experience. *A Little Book of Life and Death*, or some kindred volume, helps me in this direction. One of its impressive and suggestive sentences gives a tone to one's purpose and puts iron into one's blood.

The book covers the ground of life from youth to age. It deals with most of the deep yet common experiences that challenge our thoughts. Birth, Childhood, Youth, Love, Temptation, Sorrow, Loss, Disappointment, Ideals, Suffering, Doubt, Defeat, Dismay, Death, the Hereafter : these are the themes it sets before us, and offers a strengthening and illuminating thought for each. There is one poem in it I will set down here, that seems to me worthy of immortality. It is, I believe, by R. D. Blackmore, the author of *Lorna Doone* :

“ In the hour of death, after this life's whim,
When the heart beats low, and the eyes grow dim,
And pain has exhausted every limb—
The lover of the Lord shall trust in Him.

“ When the will has forgotten the life-long aim,
And the mind can only disgrace its fame,
And a man is uncertain of his own name—
The power of the Lord shall fill this frame.

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"When the last sigh is heaved, and the last tear shed,
And the coffin is waiting beside the bed,
And the widow and child forsake the dead—
The angel of the Lord shall lift this head.

"For even the purest delight must pall,
And power must fail, and the pride must fall,
And the love of the dearest friends grow small—
But the glory of the Lord is all in all."

A friend once gave me another small book which has been most companionable. It is called *My Little Book of Prayer*, and hails from America. Its author is Muriel Strode. America is the home of originality. Her writers seem to look at the World and Life and Time with a certain fearlessness and freshness which is characteristic of those who dwell amid vast areas. It is the land of big distances. Everything is huge in America—her mountains, her rivers, her plains, her lakes, her forests, her waste places, her wealth, her enterprise, her impudence. It is a stirring land; in it one never knows what to expect next. America is very active and enterprising and speculative in the sphere of religion. She has a large number of theological colleges and religious training-schools. She has a vast army of professors and teachers and evangelists. The Puritan strain left by the Pilgrim Fathers is still strongly marked. But her increasing restlessness has led to her turning out a brand-new religion, a fresh variety of faith, about once in every six weeks. It is a place where her old men (*are there any old men in America?*) see visions and her young men dream dreams; and the visions are sometimes a variation of delirium tremens, and the dreams

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are often nightmares. But when America is really sane, wholesome, sweet, and strong in her thinking, there is a freshness about it as delightful as a morning in spring, a fragrance as welcome as the resinous scent of her Western pines. When this kind of thinking finds its way into religion, its outward expression is remarkably arresting, suggestive, and impressive.

This small book by Muriel Strode, of little more than half a hundred pages, is a case in point. It consists of brief aphoristic comments, aspirations, meditations, self-communings, singularly apt and happy in expression, buoyant and healthy in tone, often highly original in idea, and all helping to feed the mind and to stimulate the life of the spirit. It is not prayer in the ordinary conventional sense of asking; it is rather prayer in the Emersonian sense, where he says: "Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul." The idea of prayer needs to be greatly enlarged. It need not necessarily be a matter of words. It is in a thoughtful silence, in a reverent attitude towards life, in a devout expectancy, in a hopeful temper, in the diligent work of an honest man. "In the handiwork of their craft is their prayer," declares a luminous sentence in the *Book of Ecclesiasticus*. James Montgomery has put it in two lines:

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed."

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It shadows forth the ideal life. It represents what a man would be if he could.

Here are a few characteristic extracts from this very stimulating and companionable little volume :

"I will not follow where the path may lead,
but I will go where there is no path, and I
will leave a trail."

That is the aspiration of the pioneer. There are original and adventurous spirits who disdain grooves and beaten tracks, and are apostles of the unconventional. There are strong and active and fertile minds, that give us fresh points of view and disclose new lines of thought. These are the heretics of the world, and are looked at apprehensively by the timid, and with angry contempt by the orthodox. But they are the men who keep the world alive, and prevent it settling down into stagnation and complacency.

"I would travel in all climes that
I might return and tell you of the
beauty of my own little garden plot.
I would explore heaven and hell that
I might come back and tell you what
a charming place is the earth."

This is the theme of Maeterlinck's beautiful fantasy, *The Blue Bird*. The children set out on their quest of happiness, and after a series of stupendous adventures they return home, to discover happiness in the humble cottage they had left. "A fool's eyes are in the ends of the earth," says a wise writer. People think they must travel to Kamskatka or

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Timbuctoo in order to find beauty and interest, excitement and change, wonder and adventure ; yet they may discover the beginnings of infinity in their back garden, and Eldorado over the nearest hill.

“ I am glad the thorn is on my brow,
that the blood trickles over my face ;
when I see my brother's wounds I will
also feel his pain. I am glad I fell
to-day beneath my cross ; when I see
another prostrate, I will know the weight
of the burden. I am glad I cried for
succour ; I will know the sound of a
heart-cry. I am glad I suffered alone,
deserted ; I will know the bitterness of
desolation.”

There is the whole secret of sympathy. Nothing but a living experience can give us insight. The men who read their own hearts aright are the ones who can best heal the woes of others. Here is the secret of understanding individual troubles, temptations, perplexities, doubts ; the secret also of understanding the deeper social problems. To be able to say, “ I have been in these depths,” is to become a comrade to many, though we say no more.

“ I saw a rare flower growing, and
I sought to know whence came its
entrancing redolence, its wond'rous glow,
and I saw that where it grew the ground
was wet with tears.”

The greatest and most welcome and most influential things in life are costly. There is a sweat of the brow ; there is a sorer sweat of the brain ; there is a sweat of the heart, which is the sorest

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sweat of all. The author who lives is the man who looks into his own heart and writes. The preacher who moves men is he whose message comes with the passion and the poetry of experience. Muncacksy, the famous artist, was so profoundly affected while painting his great religious pictures that his over-taxed brain at last gave way, and he ended his days in an asylum. But his pictures move the world. The abiding things are the costly things.

“The æolian must be in your breast,
else the winds are in vain.”

That has a wide application. We must have something to work upon, or we can get no response. You cannot get blood out of a stone. It is useless to read *Pickwick* if you have no sense of humour. Never attempt to recite poetry to a man destitute of emotion. *Paradise Lost* was read to the Senior Wrangler, and he said: “It’s all very nice, *but what does it prove?*” Never cast your pearls before inappropriate recipients.

Robert Louis Stevenson has a tiny book that takes us beside the still waters. His volume of *Prayers* is only about twenty pages in all, but there are many books of twenty times the bulk of infinitely less value. These prayers have been issued in beautiful form, illuminated like the Missals of the ancient monks. This means that they are already on the way to being reckoned worthy of a place among the classics of devotional literature. It is noteworthy that these are the prayers of a literary man. I have

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no wish to make Stevenson out a saint, but I cannot agree with those who speak scornfully of his Samoan devotions as a mere pose. His was the religion of a true Bohemian, which is a religion of a most fascinating kind, because it touches life at so many points. He was more than a literary man, and in that plus quantity I think I find the key to the existence of these prayers.

First of all, Stevenson was a Scot ; and that means a deep sense of religion. There is probably no nation that has such a deep-rooted religious sense as Scotland. You can see it in the multiplicity of her churches and charities ; in her splendid pulpit and educational history ; in her inveterate love of home ; in her susceptibility to the beauty and suggestion of Nature ; in the sweet sentiment and heart-breaking pathos of many of her songs. Stevenson was brought up in a devout home. His father was a deeply religious man ; his mother was steeped in the religious lore of Scotland ; his old nurse was full of that sweet and wholesome spirituality which leaves lasting impressions upon a child's mind ; the Bible was a well-thumbed book in the household. In his case nationality and heredity account for much. The key to a man's life is always to be found within ; beneath the gaiety and abandon of Stevenson's habit there were strong currents of thought and feeling and devotion running deeply in the silence.

Then Stevenson was a life-long invalid. He was never a strong man. His lungs and chest were

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weak, and he spent much time travelling about the world in search of a climate suited to his health. He was often at such a low ebb that he was not allowed to speak in the early part of the day lest he should exhaust his feeble vitality. He had frequent and alarming hæmorrhages, which left him in a state of collapse. The precarious tenure of his life had its due effect in deepening his sense of the Unseen. Again, Stevenson was an exile. For the greater part of his life he was a wanderer over the face of the earth. He loved Scotland with an ardent passion. He had a feeling for his native city of Edinburgh such as the Jews had for Jerusalem. The hills and the moors never left him, though cruel fate compelled him to leave them. They haunted his dreams. This man, in whom the love of home and native land dwelt so strongly, was doomed to spend a great part of his life in the strange scenes and amid the alien company of a South Pacific island. And in the last book he ever wrote, the unfinished *Weir of Hermiston*, his heart turned once more with intense longing to the land he loved so well. There is no exile's cry more poignant and pathetic than his lines :

“ Blows the wind to-day, and the sun and the rain are flying,
Blows the wind on the moors to-day and now,
Where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are
crying,
My heart remembers how.”

Again, Stevenson was an optimist. Courage and cheerfulness were two virtues whose praises he was

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never weary of singing. And he not only sung them, he embodied them. He faced the world with a smiling fortitude. An invalid, an exile, yet an optimist; there must be a key to such an anomaly somewhere. Add to this his persistent and prodigious industry, and you have a phenomenon not often repeated. I think I find the key to it all in that deeply hidden and jealously guarded chamber of his being where these *Prayers* were conceived.

The *Prayers* are couched in extraordinary simplicity and beauty of language. A man may offer his own prayers in the first words that come uppermost, or in no words at all—in sighs, in groans, in aspirations for which he cannot find fit speech. But a man who undertakes to lead the devotions of others should endeavour to find the fittest words at his command; for there is nothing worse than to rush into the Divine Presence without due preparation, and nothing that impresses a listener's mind more profoundly than beauty of diction in devotion. Witness the incomparable beauty and dignity of the *Book of Common Prayer* in its best collects and its unapproachable *Litany* in proof of this. They haunt the ear like an exquisite refrain. Stevenson's *Prayers* were prepared originally to suit the exigencies of his strangely assorted Samoan household, and he took pains to make the homely service memorable and impressive. The brevity of the *Prayers* is striking, and is an additional element of attractiveness. There is nothing so dull and wearisome as "long prayers." A prayer can be short, yet comprehensive and sufficient. There

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is no need to go the whole round of creation in minute detail and bewildering reiteration. The *Prayers* are a revelation of the man. His appreciation of beauty is most marked. His aspiration after the spirit of cheerfulness and courage appears on every page. His recognition of life's numerous trials, of the weakness and need of our poor human nature, of the influence of one person over another, is everywhere apparent. And over and above all is that exquisite spirit of gratitude that illumines Stevenson's character like a lamp :

“ We thank Thee, Lord, for the glory of the late days and the excellent face of Thy sun. We thank Thee for good news received. We thank Thee for the pleasures we have enjoyed and for those we have been able to confer. And now, when the clouds gather and the rain impends over the forest and our house, permit us not to be cast down : let us not lose the savour of past mercies and past pleasures ; but, like the voice of a bird singing in the rain, let grateful memory survive in the hour of darkness.”

Among these quiet companions for solitary hours and meditative moods there is a singular little book, that comes to us like a voice out of the past, called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. It records the religious faith and practice of Nicholas Hermann, a most interesting man who lived in the seventeenth century ; beginning life first as a footman, then as

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a soldier, and finally becoming a monk of the Carmelite Order, retiring to a monastery, and being known henceforth as Brother Lawrence. The small volume, bearing the above title, consists of notes of several conversations had with him and letters written by him after he had been admitted as a Lay Brother at Paris in 1666. His conversion, which took place when he was about eighteen years old, was the result of the mere sight in mid-winter of a dry and leafless tree, and of the reflections it stirred respecting the change the coming springtime would bring. From that moment he became a changed man, growing eminently in the knowledge and love of God, endeavouring constantly to walk as in His presence. He died at the age of eighty, leaving behind him a name fragrant for consecrated goodness and wholesome piety.

It is difficult at first to say why a little book of this kind helps us so much, and why its atmosphere is so sweet and fresh and fragrant. Yet it does help us, and that in no vague fashion. There is absolutely nothing of a theological nature in it, nothing ecclesiastical, nothing scholastic; its simplicity is its power. Here we see a lowly and unlearned man whose chief desire is to make his religion a reality to himself, and he does it in ways that are natural and homely, finding God in the practice of the most ordinary and even menial duties. He was put to work in the kitchen of the monastery, and he managed to make his kitchen a stepping-stone to the Highest. The manner of his conversion is the first

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thing that shows us his robust, susceptible, unsophisticated mind. He saw a bare tree in mid-winter, and thought of the hidden life that was in it, and of the miracle of the approaching springtime when that same bare tree would be dressed in living green. This reflection made a new man of him. It was not a conventional conversion. God is primarily a Poet, not a celestial Doctor of Divinity ; and a tree may well be a more potent means of grace than a tract on the Trinity. If a man can get more nourishment out of a sunset than out of a sermon, who would blame him ?

Brother Lawrence took a remarkably sane view of Faith. He did not regard it as a comfortable reverie, a noonday siesta, a pleasant frame of mind induced by getting piously intoxicated on sermons and anthems and ritualism ; for there is a drunkenness, “but not with wine.” He thought that faith was not a quiescent quality, but something we can quicken and enliven by going about our common business faithfully, by doing lowly duties in a lofty spirit, by enduring hardships with a cheerful heart, by doing kindnesses to others. He thought also that faith is the spring of conduct, not merely the source of devotion. It is the dynamic of action as well as of prayer. It is the energy of the market-place as well as the inspiration of the sanctuary. He was in the habit of looking to God for help in little everyday things, and consequently received strength for the day. Herein he differs from most of us. We keep God for the crisis. We reserve our religion for state occasions. We

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bring out the Bible when death comes, and think about Eternity when we are not feeling very well. We are among the great company of those who call upon God only when they are in distress. We make a convenience of Him. Brother Lawrence wanted Him all day and every day. He wanted aid in the irritating and irksome tasks of his office. He was made cook in the monastery kitchen, much to his annoyance. He disliked the menial work; but he was so determined to do it like a man and not like a whining school-boy or a spoiled child that he made a habit of looking to God continually throughout the day, that he might be strengthened to do his task without peevishness or complaint. That is a more manly thing to do than the taking of a city, for it means the ruling of the spirit.

As might be expected, Brother Lawrence was not a morbid person. He did not lie in the dark, confessing his sins. He refused to brood dismally over his shortcomings and failures. He resisted the tendency to melancholy introspection. He declined to vivisect himself, to analyze his motives, to put himself under a moral microscope, to take himself to pieces fibre by fibre to see how his spiritual life was getting on. He knew that you cannot grow gardens so. He did not torment himself with perpetual doubts and questionings. A man who was converted by a tree could never do that; Nature preserves him from such insanity; the open air and the sunshine have entered his soul and killed the bacilli of scepticism and suspicion. If Brother Lawrence made a mistake he

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admitted it, and if possible corrected it. If he fell into error, he confessed it and began again. If his first efforts broke down and his first resolutions failed, he rose up and made a fresh start. He refused to grovel in the dust, and abuse his soul, and call himself hard names, and rail at fate, and howl dismally to his Maker. Like the wise, simple, honest, humble man he was, he simply told his fault to God, asked His forgiveness, implored His help, and went on.

Brother Lawrence had, above all, learned that supremely wholesome lesson that to labour is to pray. "Every man's task is his life-preserver." He believed in the devotion of activity. Not that he considered the time spent in the chapel wasted ; but he said that he was more truly united to God in his outward employments than when he left them for retirement and devotion. He thought that he was serving God more truly when he was working in the monastery kitchen, preparing the simple meals and washing dishes, than when he was poring over a breviary or kneeling before the altar. I can see the effect of his tree-conversion again in this. This man was more at home with his Creator when he was being honestly useful than when he was chanting Aves and Paternosters, and swinging incense, and bending before images of the saints, and receiving the Sacrament. When God's open air has entered a man's heart, he can find a way to the Highest through anything—through a ledger, a bicycle, a picture, a flower, a cricket-match, a children's party,

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a friend, a thunderstorm, or the kitchen sink. For him henceforth the earth is a place of vision and symbol, and, like a true mystic, he sees the Divine in common things.

A life of such confidence and simplicity as this is at once a rebuke and an encouragement. It rebukes our morbid thoughts and feelings, our sick fancies, our vain imaginations, our fussy methods, our perspiring and lumbering efforts at reform, our perpetual questionings and diseased introspections. But it is an infinite encouragement when we see how really simple a thing religion is ; that it need not be complicated with theological problems, or confused with doctrinal dilemmas ; that it is not necessarily coloured or biassed or clogged by ecclesiastical associations ; that it fits into every kind of life as to the manner born ; that it includes the whole of human thought and activity ; that it makes a man's heart happy and gay and healthy ; that nothing need be a barrier where the heart wants anything very much. "Love laughs at locksmiths." If that be true of human sweethearting, it is truer still of the great love-story of the soul.

CHAPTER VI

THE VALLEY OF TWILIGHT

THERE is a class of books of a pensive and reflective kind to which I have always been very strongly drawn. One grows to love them for their suggestiveness. They are continually opening up vistas of thought in one's own mind, awakening slumbering memories, reviving old associations. Of this class Mr. Arthur Christopher Benson is a prominent and prolific representative. One feels a strange air of quietude stealing over the mind as one reads, and there is an intimate sense of shady walks in cloistered gardens, and of dreamy gazing upon the shaven turf of a college lawn or the sober precincts of a cathedral close. Curiously allied with these in my own mind is another type of book of a more aggressive and violent kind, and yet steeped in the same atmosphere of twilight, though with the shade deepening into gloom. Let one instance of this latter type be given first.

A score of years ago I was living in the good old town of Coventry. It was in my days of "diggings," and I was always on the prowl for books of all sorts

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to lighten my loneliness. One night I was calling upon a legal friend who also browsed in wide literary fields. We had been discussing various writers, emphasizing our personal favourites, underlining them, so to speak, in conversational red ink, when my friend abruptly asked :

“Do you know Ambrose Bierce?”

“Never heard of him,” I said.

My friend, whom I will call Briefless, for it was a strict description of him at the time, gazed at me quizzically.

“There’s the wonder of it,” he said. “Here is a man who writes some of the strongest stuff of the day, and scarcely anybody knows anything about him!”

“What has he written?” I asked, on the *qui vive* at once; for though Briefless was deficient in legal acumen, I knew him to have a lively and fastidious taste in literature.

Briefless leaned forward with the air of one about to disclose a revelation or impart a State secret, and said impressively :

“Have you never heard of a book called *In the Midst of Life*?”

“Never,” I replied. “It’s a good title, though.”

“Get it,” said Briefless in decisive tone; “get it at once. That’s Ambrose Bierce. He’ll make your hair stand on end. He’ll cause your flesh to creep. He’ll make you terrified to go upstairs in the dark. If you read him immediately before going to bed, I won’t be responsible for the consequences!”

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"Good gracious!" I exclaimed, "is it as bad as that?"

Briefless glared at me in a kind of triumph, and nodded. After puffing vehemently at his pipe for a moment or two, enjoying my growing interest and astonishment, "Wait," he said; "will you read it to-night if I lend it to you?"

"I will," said I, and I meant it. Briefless arose, went to his bookcase, and, returning, put into my hands a volume in yellow boards, bearing the title, *In the Midst of Life: By Ambrose Bierce*, and on the front a telling picture of a horseman leaping from a cliff into the valley below. I took the volume home, read it through in bed the same night, and never slept a wink.

I may as well say at once that I had never read anything like Ambrose Bierce since Edgar Allan Poe. He struck me as being more eerie and tremendous even than Poe, on account of his greater simplicity and restraint. Ambrose Bierce disdains rhetoric. He does not pile up words. He has no tortuous sentences. He does not accumulate an infinity of detail. There is something in his sentences of the quality of an etching. They bite into the mind; they leave an indelible picture upon the imagination. I have read his book two or three times since, and see no reason to revise my first impressions of Ambrose Bierce. He is a man who can write the most weird, terrible, haunting short stories I have ever read. His descriptions, many of them struck off in a single sentence, stick in the mind for days.

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Half his book consists of strange episodes taken from the American Civil War, and one need wish to read nothing more thrilling than *A Horseman in the Sky*, more weird than *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, or more awful than *The Affair at Coulter's Notch*. The other half of the book contains stories of civilians, and a creepier set of tales never came between two covers. The appetite is whetted at the outset by a tale called *The Suitable Surroundings*, the scene of which is set in a forest, with a haunted hut, a blood-curdling manuscript, and a solitary candle as stage properties. Another tale bears the arresting title, *A Watcher by the Dead*, which is as gruesome a dish as any man could sup upon. Then comes a surprising yarn, *The Man and the Snake*, which keeps you on pins and needles for a quarter of an hour, and leaves you gasping at the wholly unexpected *dénouement*. If a man can read *The Boarded Window* without an uncomfortable sensation, he is a *blasé* customer; and if he can get through *The Middle Toe of the Right Foot* without a creeping of the spine, he is a hardened reprobate, and I shall not seek his company.

It will be gathered, therefore, that Ambrose Bierce is no novice. I believe this is his solitary book: at any rate, on this side the Atlantic. One could wish that a man capable of such powerful work as *In the Midst of Life* displays would write more. But Bierce is a fastidious writer. He is one of the select few who take pains with their style. Some folk may not care for his type of story; certainly he is not the

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man to whom one would go for a daily portion. There is nothing charming, poetic, or idyllic about *In the Midst of Life*; nothing of quiet everyday incident; nothing of pastoral beauty, simple domesticity, commonplace routine. The episodes he selects for treatment are for the most part violent, eerie, strange, terrible—things out of the ordinary run of experience. His war stories are remarkable. They serve to reveal at once the horrors of battle and the splendour of heroism.

Though one does not turn to a book like this as to a familiar friend, but comes to it with a sense of the awesome in experience, yet there is a place for such literature, and in his own line Ambrose Bierce is a genius. We could not bear to read every day of incidents such as those revealed by the recent tragedy of the Polar Seas,* but once in a while it is a bracing and sobering experience to be brought face to face with the terrors of Nature and with the magnificent heroism of men in direst peril. One can imagine the concise power with which Ambrose Bierce would tell the story of Captain Oates stumbling into the blinding blizzard to his death, carrying out like a true man the stern code of honour in the Arctic Regions, which obliges a man stricken with hopeless illness to walk out into the wild, lest he expose his comrades to the risk of contagion, or lessen their chances of safety. Nothing more sublimely simple, more infinitely pathetic, than this incident has come our way for a long time, and one thinks with an

* Captain Scott and his party.

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indescribable pang, yet with a thrill of pride, of that noble inscription on the lonely cairn amid the desolate snows: "Hereabouts died a very gallant gentleman, Captain L. E. G. Oates, Inniskilling Dragoons, who, on their return from the Pole in March, 1912, willingly walked to his death in a blizzard to try and save his comrades, beset by hardship." Were the incident not immortal as it stands, Ambrose Bierce would make it so by his power of picturing precisely such appealing episodes.

But I have strayed from the valley of twilight into the valley of death, though the book that led me there was *In the Midst of Life*, and I come back to the vale of pensive meditation. One of my earliest book friends was Washington Irving, and he captured me with *The Sketch-Book*. The name of Washington Irving is not perhaps to be reckoned in the front rank of American men of letters; he was hardly robust enough for that. But though he may not stand out with the same distinctiveness of individuality as Hawthorne, Lowell, Emerson, Longfellow, and those who make the chief glory of American literature, he has a niche of his own, and is as much beloved as any of his greater countrymen. Indeed, there is a time in youth when Washington Irving seems for the moment to o'ertop them all, so intimate and winning is his appeal. He writes with such charming urbanity, such amiable courtesy, such graceful refinement; he throws a double spell over us with his geniality and his artistry. He is one of those writers who, at a certain period of life, provoke

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affection and even hero-worship; and the youthful idolater, panting for recognition and conscious of tremendous powers, wastes reams of excellent cream-laid, faint-ruled paper in hopeless attempts at imitation. It looks so easy, that smoothly flowing diction, and the budding genius seizes his pen, and, with rumpled hair, and eye in fine frenzy rolling, begins to emulate that chaste rhetoric with a quenchless ardour, until he discovers that this seemingly easy page is the last result of a well-nigh perfect artistry, and that though he lived to the age of Rip Van Winkle himself, he could not produce more than a colourless and feeble copy, as little like the original as water unto wine.

Washington Irving was American by birth, but British by descent. His father belonged to an Orkney family, and his mother was a native of Devonshire. His sympathies were largely with the Old Country, and he paid several long visits to England and made hosts of friends. *The Sketch-Book*, which has deservedly become a classic in what is called Polite Literature or Belles Lettres, is made up chiefly of descriptions and recollections of English scenes and customs, the most striking being an account of an old-fashioned English Christmas not unworthy of Charles Dickens himself. Both town and country life appealed to Irving's sympathies, and drew tributes from his ready pen. He was a keen and shrewd observer, and his genial spirit and wide sunny outlook, combined with his artistic excellence, made his book a production of singular

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charm. The English writer with whom he is most akin is Addison, whom he resembles both in style and subject-matter. The sketches of London, its ancient inns and famous buildings, are quite in the Addisonian manner.

Irving has a remarkable talent for description. In his sketch on *Westminster Abbey* there is a memorable passage, which I must allow myself the luxury of quoting, describing the effect of the organ music rolling through those marvellous aisles and lofty roofs: "Suddenly the notes of the deep-labouring organ burst upon the ear, falling with doubled and redoubled intensity, and rolling, as it were, huge billows of sound. How well do their volume and grandeur accord with this mighty building! With what pomp do they swell through its vast vaults, and breathe their awful harmony through these caves of death, and make the silent sepulchre vocal! And now they rise in triumphant acclamation, heaving higher and higher their accordant notes, and piling sound on sound. And now they pause, and the soft notes of the choir break out into sweet gushes of melody; they soar aloft, and warble along the roof, and seem to play about these lofty vaults like the pure airs of heaven. Again the pealing organ heaves its thrilling thunders, compressing air into music, and rolling it forth upon the soul. What long-drawn cadences! What solemn sweeping concords! It grows more and more dense and powerful—it fills the vast pile, and seems to jar the very walls—the ear is stunned—the senses are over-

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whelmed. And now it is winding up in full jubilee—it is rising from the earth to heaven—the very soul seems rapt away and floated upwards on this swelling tide of harmony!”

It has always seemed to me that Washington Irving's *Sketch-Book* is pre-eminently one of those books which its author must have enjoyed writing. It was doubtless a labour, for no man can attain to that exquisite style without prolonged toil and constant practice; but it must have been a labour which was a genuine pleasure to bestow upon such a production. There is no doubt a great deal of high-flown nonsense talked about “Art for Art's sake,” but there is no reason why a man who writes frankly for a living should be a traitor to the principles of Art. Artists are not as a body well-to-do men; they are persons of Bohemian tastes and happy-go-lucky habits, and are not assiduous in keeping accounts; they are usually folk, like actors, of reckless generosity, and thrift is to them one of the coldest and most impossible of the virtues. The butcher and the baker and the milkman are not, as a rule, persons of lofty altruistic principles, and they demand payment at distressingly frequent intervals even from artists and poets. But I can well understand a literary artist writing even for so sordid and prosaic a purpose as to satisfy these insistent creditors, and at the same time thoroughly enjoying the work he is doing, and being absolutely loyal to his artistic instinct.

I do not know whether Washington Irving wrote

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The Sketch-Book primarily to pay his bills or not ; but whatever his motive, I am sure he enjoyed writing his book. The mere recalling of old scenes, old times, old associations and experiences, is a pleasurable effort, and the attempt to give them permanence in beautiful language enhances the pleasure. When a man becomes really absorbed in what he is writing, he forgets all about the motive and everything else ; his whole interest is in the work before him, and his enthusiasm bars out every other consideration. Irving wrote his book as the spirit moved him, and that is why it lays hold of the susceptible and discerning reader to-day. It is easy to criticize such writing as his—easy to condemn it as stilted, artificial, self-conscious, elaborate, overloaded, grandiose, rhetorical, and what not ; but there are some of us who would be very glad to exchange a dozen volumes of the fluent journalese of the present period for a single chapter of this literary artist. There is nothing tawdry, vulgar, or meretricious about Irving's work. If he loved a little verbal embroidery, it was always done in perfect taste. Every paragraph in *The Sketch-Book* is the handiwork of a man who would never send forth anything poor or base.

The month of March in the present year (1913) has been made memorable in the literary world by the passing of one of the most remarkable writers of recent years. If ever a man wrote genuine literature, it was Mark Rutherford. The books on which his fame will chiefly rest are three—*The Auto-*

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biography, *The Deliverance*, and *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*. His other volumes, *Miriam's Schooling*, *Catherine Furze*, *Clara Hopgood*, and *Pages from a Journal*, though containing many good things, and all bearing the hall-mark of the same austere, incomparable style, are not so outstanding. There are, however, one or two scenes in *Catherine Furze* which are as great as anything he ever wrote, notably the death of Phœbe, the servant-girl; and for my own part I have found a singular fascination in this particular story.

Rutherford's real name was William Hale White, and the veiling of his identity was characteristic of the man. When he first began to write his work attracted but scant attention, and even after the lapse of years it was known only to a few. The issue of his works in a shilling edition two or three years ago made him known to a wider circle, but he was not a popular writer, and is not likely to become so. I shall never forget my first reading of *The Autobiography* and *The Deliverance* and *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*. They were made known to me through the pages of *The Young Man*, which, under the able and enterprising editorship of F. A. Atkins, was at that time a most interesting journal. W. J. Dawson used to be a regular contributor to its pages, and with his keen literary instinct he had "spotted" the real genius of Mark Rutherford, and wrote enthusiastically about him in *The Young Man*. It was in this way my introduction to Rutherford came about. Here was a new writer, indeed. His

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style was a delight—simple, clear, incisive, not a word wasted, with an aptness of epithet, a vividness of phrase, a magic of delineation, that revealed the hand of a master. It carried you on, page after page, and it was not until you had laid the book down that you realized that you had been led into the depths of life, and had been reading of psychological mysteries peculiarly difficult of presentation in words.

It is certainly true that the total effect of Rutherford is rather grim and melancholy, and it is possible that some would describe him as morbid. He is a dweller in the valley of twilight. A cold grey light lies over his books, like the thin bleak sunshine of a winter day. Often the light does not break through at all, and one seems to be wandering in a desolate world over which the massed clouds hang like a pall of lead. Yet, though it is a sterile world into which he takes us, there are hints of hidden fires, and now and then they break out into flame with a scorching and unforgettable effect. He deals with deep problems. No writer of recent years has ever described the problems of religious doubt or probed the consciousness of the honest sceptic with greater power. He has an unerring insight into grey, irksome, monotonous, hopeless lives. He is the apostle of the misunderstood. He knew the poignant feeling of isolation so vividly expressed in the plaint of Ezekiel the prophet: "Ah, Lord God, they say of me, Is he not a speaker of parables?" He writes with extraordinary insight of the collisions of char-

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acter in the ordinary commonplace relationships of life, and of the incompatibilities of temperament which are sometimes found behind the flat-chested frontage of dingy streets. He is the friend of those whose minds are beset with unanswerable questions. He understands the inner life of English Nonconformity as no other writer has done. The portraits he draws of some of the less edifying specimens of English Dissent are like steel engravings: every line tells, and stands out with startling distinctness. No one who has read him will ever forget the description of the dark and dismal purlieu of Drury Lane, and of the gallant attempt made there to bring some gleam of light and some touch of beauty into the sad and sordid lives of its inhabitants. It is like a descent into the regions of the Inferno.

The books of Mark Rutherford stand very high in the literature of self-portraiture. He is absolutely unsparing in his unveiling of the intricacies and involutions of the human heart. *The Autobiography* and its companion volume, *The Deliverance*, are worthy to stand beside De Quincey's *Opium Eater*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*.

Mr. Balfour recently expressed a very natural preference for cheerful books, and probably in that leaning he will have a host of followers. Those who desire cheerful literature will give Mark Rutherford a wide berth. But there is a place for such books as his, written with a sad and relentless sincerity, laying bare the secret places of the heart, revealing

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the thoughts of one who has "dwelt in uncomprehended loneliness of soul, and pondered things too deep for him, and felt all the cruel drudgery, the callousness, the solitude of life in great cities." He does not hesitate to tell us the precise truth about himself, if the telling of it will help in any degree to explain the baffling mystery of his own life.

He tells also, in words that bite into the mind like an etching into a plate, the exact truth about the people he has met. He has a Carlylean faculty for painting unforgettable portraits. Here is one of the obsolete presidents of a theological hall of forty years ago: "An elderly gentleman with a pompous degree of doctor of divinity—a gentleman with lightish hair, with a most mellifluous voice and a most pastoral manner, reading his prim little tracts to us, directed against the shallow infidel. About a dozen of these tracts settled the infidel and the whole mass of unbelief from the time of Celsus downward." There is an admirable sketch also of an atheistic publisher, inordinately proud of ideas imbibed from a remote past, "ideas which had never fructified in him, but were like hard stones which he rattled in his pocket."

Perhaps the most striking of all his portraits is that of the child Marie, whom everyone deemed so dull and stupid, but who was transformed into a perfect little nurse when her mother took typhoid fever. Mark Rutherford has a very tender sympathy for all sensitive, wounded, maimed, or suffering lives. "How many (writes W. J. Dawson) will recognize their own youthful sensitiveness in his cry that he

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could never find an ideal friendship, that he always called twice for his friend's once, that he always seemed to be obtruding his love, that at length the conviction grew upon him that 'there was nothing in him.' And how finely does he say of love when once he has found it—'If a man wants to know the potency of love, he must be a menial; he must be despised. Those who are prosperous and courted cannot understand its power. Let him come home after he has suffered worse than hatred—the contempt of a superior, who knows that he can afford to be contemptuous, seeing that he can replace his slave at a moment's notice; let him be trained by his tyrant to dwell upon the thought that he belongs to the vast crowd of people in London who are unimportant, almost useless, to whom it is a charity to offer employment, who are conscious of possessing no gift which makes them of any value to anybody, and he will then comprehend the Divine efficacy of the affection of that woman to whom he is dear. God's mercy be praised evermore for it! I cannot write poetry, but if I could, no theme would tempt me like that of love to such a person as I was—not love, as I say again, to the hero, but to the helot.'"

In one of the most memorable passages of his books Rutherford writes: "I should like to add one more beatitude to those of the Gospels, and to say, 'Blessed are they who heal us of our self-despisings.' Of all services which can be done to man, I know of none more precious." To a large extent, Rutherford has been rewarded with his own beatitude, and no

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more appropriate sentence could be carved upon the stone that marks his grave.

It has become fashionable in recent years to invent a lay figure for the purpose of expressing one's own views of life and character. One of the most striking examples of this ventriloquial type of literature is George Gissing's book, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. It is written in a fine vein of reflection, with touches of quiet humour that lie on the pages like sunlight on the hills, and depths of pathos so poignant that a band seems to tighten round the heart as one reads. The style alone would make this book memorable—so simple, clear, and forcible, with many a passage of poetry and eloquence, many a page of beautiful and suggestive reverie; with a high appreciation of the value of words, with an aptness of epithet, a vividness of phrase, and a rhythm of language that make the reader often pause upon a sentence or read a line over again for the sheer pleasure of the artistry. It is real literature.

Some people may find a tinge of the morbid in these pages. I suppose that this is almost inseparable from books which are written in the Valley of Twilight. In Gissing's case it was inevitable that a drab colour should sometimes creep into his reflections, for the book is largely autobiography, and the reader catches many a glimpse of the strange, grey, almost squalid, life he once lived in Grub Street. The descriptions of his lodging in a London cellar, into which the light filtered through a grating in the

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pavement above, where he sat and wrote far into the night; of his frequent spasms of hunger, when he hardly had a copper in his pocket; of his miserable peregrinations in damp and foggy and squalid streets; of his thwarted ambitions and his longings for larger life and liberty—these things make melancholy reading, and the man who has endured such poverty and unhappiness may be forgiven much. Nothing is sadder than the tale of genius unrecognized, perverted, or repressed. It is horrible to think of a man capable of writing such a delicate and thoughtful book as this being compelled to drudge for a crust in a cellar.

Yet there is another side to it. This man had a city of the mind. He had meat to eat of which the world knew not. On his deal table under the iron grating the sun rays fell dimly upon his Shakespeare and a few favourite classics. His hard, pinched life gave him an insight into the depths of things, and he came to understand and to sympathize with the broken and stunted lives of the very poor. He had his beloved books to read; nay, more, he himself wrote books. Deep in his heart there slept a feeling for beauty, a love of Nature, which woke like a flower from the encumbering earth, when the spring-time of opportunity and good fortune smiled at last. Nothing in the whole book is more moving than this man's response to Nature when at length he was able to gaze upon her face. Circumstances arose which enabled him to exchange his London cellar for a cottage in Devon. Paradise from the Inferno!

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Devon! The very name is music. There is no fairer spot in all broad England. How often the vision of the country lured Ryecroft when he toiled in London, and he had perforce to be content with the vision! "How I dreaded the white page I had to foul with ink! Above all, on such days as this, when the blue eyes of spring laughed from between rosy clouds, when the sunlight shimmered upon my table and made me long, long almost to madness, for the scent of the flowering earth, for the green of hillside larches, for the singing of the skylark above the downs!" Now the vision materialized. He was able, through a stroke of fortune, to leave the vast, relentless city and seek sanctuary in a Devonshire cot. The man who could thus feel for the beauty of the earth and the glory of the sky, who could thus visualize the spring even in the midst of misery, was able now to wander forth into Devonshire lanes, and see the primrose starring the bank, and hear the lark trilling in the blue. "All about my garden to-day the birds are loud. To say that the air is filled with their song gives no idea of the ceaseless piping, whistling, trilling, which at times rings to heaven in a triumphant unison, a wild accord. . . ."

Think of the man whose ear was wont to hear nothing but the babel of the streets, the roar and clatter of traffic, the clamorous shouts of costers and shrill screams of women and children, who was used to listen for the heavy tramp of the policeman's feet as he passed over the grating above the cellar where he sat and wrote—think of him sitting now in his

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cottage garden or his quiet room writing a note like this: "Every morning when I awake I thank Heaven for silence. This is my orison. I remember the London days when sleep was broken by clash and clang, by roar and shriek, and when my first sense on returning to consciousness was hatred of the life about me. . . . Here, wake at what hour I may, early or late, I lie amid gracious stillness. Perchance a horse's hoof rings rhythmically upon the road; perhaps a dog barks from a neighbouring farm; it may be that there comes the far, soft murmur of a train from the other side of the Exe; but these are almost the only sounds that could force themselves upon my ear. A voice, at any time of the day, is the rarest thing. But there is the rustle of branches in the morning breeze; there is the music of a sunny shower against the window; there is the matin song of birds. Several times lately I have lain wakeful when there sounded the first note of the earliest lark; it makes me almost glad of my restless nights. The only trouble that touches me in these moments is the thought of my long life wasted amid the senseless noises of man's world. Year after year this spot has known the same tranquillity; with ever so little of good fortune, with ever so little wisdom, beyond what was granted me, I might have blessed my manhood with calm, might have made for myself in later life a long retrospect of bowered peace. As it is, I enjoy with something of sadness, remembering that this melodious silence is but the prelude of that deeper stillness which waits to enfold us all."

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The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft abound in passages like this, and I do not know of anything that reveals a man's quality so much, of anything that tells so clearly that he has kept his soul alive, as this power of response to beauty, to Nature, to simple everyday things. When a man has lost the faculty of seeing the wonderful in the commonplace, his better part has died within him. After all, the miraculous is not in the abnormal, the exceptional, the portentous, but in the great silent forces, the familiar, persistent things, like the glory of the sun, the wizardry of the moon, the shining of the stars, the wind on the heath; things like gravitation, the motion of planets, the mystery of dawn, the coming of spring. The mystic is the man who sees the Divine in common things; and he is not a man to be pitied, but envied, who, in the midst of adverse circumstance, amid hunger, poverty, and dismay, keeps the child heart that "leaps up when it beholds a rainbow in the sky."

This mystical faculty of seeing the Divine in common things reminds me of another small book, to which I should like to pay a tribute of gratitude—*The Roadmender*. This little volume would seem to be on its way to becoming a classic in the literature of quiet reflection and mystic reverie. It has gone through edition after edition, and has been issued in sumptuously illustrated form, with the large printed page, the ample margin, the specially woven paper—the various embellishments of the literary epicure. The book has gathered around itself an atmosphere

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of pathos, almost of tragedy, since the few meagre details of its author's life have leaked out. The name of "Michael Fairless" has become dear to many sympathetic and discerning hearts. Her book was written largely on her deathbed ; the last section of it came from her lips as she lay slowly dying during the final nine days of her life. The book has thus the pathos of association ; a halo of sanctity hangs about the frail figure of this traveller in the Last Valley. But apart altogether from knowledge of the author, the book has merits of its own sufficiently great to attract attention and secure admiration.

It is difficult to say wherein the charm of *The Roadmender* lies. It is elusive as a fragrance ; fugitive yet haunting as a melody. The spell lies partly in the style, partly in the thought, partly in the allusions to the deep things of life ; but no analysis can explain the subtle influence which exhales from these pages. The book has personality, outlook, a point of view. If there is any one word which expresses one's feeling about such a book, it is the word "vision." Here is a writer who sees and can tell what she sees. She sees the things which other folk pass by unnoticed, or in which they perceive no significance. She hears the undertones of life. She is aware of the quiet streams of thought and feeling that run deeply in the silences. She has an exquisite sensibility towards Nature ; a strange kinship with animals, birds, and all living things ; an equally strong and sympathetic link with humanity.

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It is this all-roundness of sympathy which gives sanity and vigour to her treatment of life.

Michael Fairless is not a weak sentimentalist. Loving beast and bird, she is not one of those un-human beings who think more of a dog or a horse than of their nearest kin; though an invalid, she is not a recluse; though she broods, she is not morbid; she is utterly free from that diseased egotism and painful self-analysis which is the bane of so many of those stricken by untoward fate. She neither shrieks at destiny nor glooms over it. Her thoughts turn outward; in the simplicities and the common-places of daily life she finds heart's-ease and almost exuberant joy.

I can understand certain people taking up *The Roadmender* and finding nothing in it. Be it so: let them go to their own place. Doubtless they have their reward. *The Roadmender* will draw its own circle, gather its own constituency. It will not appeal to those who must above all things have something novel, something clever, something smart. *The Roadmender* lives in a different world. Those who have suffered from the boredom of cleverness will revel in these loftier skies, these wider spaces, these cleaner airs. Michael Fairless understands the dangers of our artificial life. She realizes that this bustling civilization is sapping the strength of man, draining away his better self, turning him into a machine. Individuality is now at a discount, and man suffers immeasurable loss through the mechanizing of his work and the hardening effect of routine.

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It is a high price to pay for anything with the paralysis of one's personality. "Once the reaper grasped the golden corn-stems, and with dexterous sweep of sickle set free the treasure of the earth. Once the creatures of the field were known to him, and his eye caught the flare of scarlet and blue as the frail poppies and the sturdy corn-cockles laid down their beauty at his feet; now he sits serene on Juggernaut's car, its guiding Dæmon, and the field is silent to him."

It would be hard to say what are the most charming things in *The Roadmender*—its beauty of diction, its rich suggestiveness, the wonder of its natural descriptions, the fragments of conversation recorded by the roadside. What an artist Michael Fairless is! What an eye she has for colour! Take this little picture of autumn: "Autumn is here, and it is already late. He has painted the hedges russet and gold, scarlet and black, and a tangle of grey; now he has damp brown leaves in his hair and frost in his finger-tips. It is a season of contrasts; at first all is stir and bustle, the ingathering of man and beast; barn and rickyard stand filled with golden treasure; at the farm the sound of threshing; in wood and copse the squirrels busied 'twixt tree and storehouse, while the ripe nuts fall with thud of thunder rain. When the harvesting is over, the fruit gathered, the last rick thatched, there comes a pause. Earth strips off her bright colours and shows a bare and furrowed face; the dead leaves fall gently and sadly through the calm, sweet air; grey mists

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drape the fields and hedges. The migratory birds have left, save a few late swallows; and as I sit at work in the soft, still rain, I can hear the blackbird's melancholy trill and the thin pipe of the redbreast's winter song—the air is full of the sound of farewell."

The final section of *The Roadmender* is called *At the White Gate*. The writer has often seen it across the green meadows, glimmering in the twilight; now, as she lies a-dying, she sees it yet in her quick imagination, and it has become for her the symbol of immortality. At the White Gate the pen falls from her hand. The voice that painfully dictated the last sentences, when she could no longer grasp the pen, is silent: she has spoken her message. Though she speaks frequently of death, her message is neither melancholy nor morbid; there is a touch of wistfulness in it, as of one trying to penetrate the shadows, but she treads the Valley without fear. In her very last chapter she speaks of the wonder of life, and harks back once more to the beauty of the world. Nature tugs at her heart-strings. She finds it hard to drag herself away from the generous bosom of Mother Earth. A few things here at least are solid and certain, but afterwards——! Still, it is not a black and gloomy portal through which she passes: it is a White Gate.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE SPURS OF PARNASSUS

ARE we less poetical than we were once? The question has been recurring to my mind since a friend incontinently buttonholed me in the street and detained me in an east wind to discuss whether poetry is read now as much as it used to be. He maintained with sorrowful insistence that it is not. As for me, I felt in the position of Sherlock Holmes when Dr. Watson requested his opinion on some knotty problem, and the shrewd detective shakes his head and says: "No data, Watson; it is a capital mistake to reason without data."

The booksellers' list might supply some ground to work upon, and as a matter of fact I believe the *Standard Poets* have a fairly steady and continuous sale. Many of these, doubtless, are purchased for ornament rather than use, just because one ought to have them; and many are gifted as prizes to ingenuous schoolboys, whose private partialities lean rather to Jack Sheppard than John Milton. But while making every reasonable deduction, I am loth to believe that we are losing our sense of beauty in thought and language. It cannot be that the Muse

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has taken flight for ever, and that she lives only in stone and bronze and fond memorials. It is customary now to bewail the Past, to weep crocodile's tears on public platforms as we describe and denounce the degenerate Present, to print our jeremiads in pessimistic and expensive volumes expounding the words "There were giants in those days." This has become a fashion, and we all strive to follow the cult of Ecclesiastes. It is picturesque melancholy, histrionic grief, and it pays. If we can only groan artistically, we gain quite a reputation for earnestness; and if we can manage to speak in a pulpit-voice of the follies of youth and the sins of society, we shall be hailed as modern prophets.

"But are we less poetical?" inquires my friend. That is the point. If by that is meant, are we less given to stringing rhymes, and ringing the changes on "love" and "dove," "heart" and "part," "tears" and "fears," we may be; if we are less given to confusing poetry with clipped and mangled words, such as "thro'" and "'neath" and "'twixt" and "o'er," let us be duly thankful. But if we mean, are we less susceptible to the beauty and wonder and terror of the world, the pathos of life, the glory of human nature? then I should hesitate to pass summary sentence on the present as a wholly hardened and material age. Poetry may change its form, but poetry will live as long as the world. The pessimist tells us that the world is in its dotage; the sane man says it is in its dawn. Kingsley was right when he sang in his robust and manly way:

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“ While a slave bewails his fetters ;
While an orphan pleads in vain ;
While an infant lisps his letters,
Heir of all the ages' gain ;
While a lip grows ripe for kissing ;
While a moan from man is wrung ;
Know, by every want and blessing,
That the world is young.”

In short, the materials for poetry are still with us—Nature and Humanity. And that includes the Unknown, the Infinite, the Beyond, the great secret that finds its expression in Religion.

“ In the Spring a young man's fancy
Lightly turns to thoughts of love.”

Thus every Spring means a resurrection of the poetical. For even if the young man's fancy does not attempt to throw itself into fluent verse and express its passion in *The Poets' Corner* of the local paper, yet those tender thoughts of his are the stuff of which romance is made, of which dreams are woven, of which lyrics spring, of which tragedies are born. This makes us kin with Shakespeare and all the great ones who have thrilled the world's heart with noble speech. They speak our rapture for us. They are the mouthpiece of our passion. They interpret our romance, our fear, our woe. They give substance to our dreams and that for which we have no words. I often think what a friend a great and true poet must be to the immense multitude of the inarticulate. For most of us poetic or dramatic expression is impossible. The Good Fairy did not stand beside our cradles to bestow upon us the

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golden gift of memorable speech. And yet we have everything within us that goes to make the poem and the drama: love, hate, hope, fear, joy, sorrow, greed, jealousy, ambition—all are there. A Shakespeare comes and interprets us to ourselves. He combines the scattered elements, broods over them, welds them in the fire of imagination, and sends them forth in a Hamlet, a Macbeth, a Romeo, an Othello, an Iago, a Rosalind, a Desdemona, an Imogen, a Cordelia; and we know them as we know each other, as we know ourselves. He has held the mirror up to Nature.

A poet must have two things pre-eminently—the seeing eye and the shaping brain. What a rare combination that is! Many of us can see, but we cannot shape. Many could shape if only they could see. As it is, their productions are a welter of words. I hardly know anything more distressing, even to torture, than to have an idea which one knows and feels to be true and good and beautiful, and yet not to be able to fit it to apt language. We spend hours in picking and choosing among words and phrases, rejecting, scoring out, re-writing, tearing up in disgust, writing once more and yet again, and finally, in despair, committing our fancy to the flames. It is a desperate experience. We are almost tempted in such moments to envy “the mob of gentlemen who write with ease.” And yet, no! Fluency is the most fatal disease from which a man can suffer. To hear of certain modern authors sitting down before their Remingtons or Yosts and clicking out their three or

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four novels per annum at so much per thousand words, or marching up and down the room, with a pipe in their mouths, dictating to an attractive but bored amanuensis—it makes one shudder. Pot-boilers may come that way, but literature cannot be produced so.

A tale is told, with what foundation I know not, to the effect that at a certain banquet, when the toast of “The Paisley Poets” was proposed, every man present stood up to respond. There is such a delicious charm and naïveté about the story that I have always felt it ought to be true. It shows such a sterling and unblushing appreciation of one’s own merits. And if you do not stand up for yourself, who can be expected to do it for you? Sir W. S. Gilbert has put the matter finally:

“If you wish in this world to advance,
Your merits you’re bound to enhance ;
You must stir it and stump it,
And blow your own trumpet,
Or, trust me, you haven’t a chance !”

Even those carrion crows, the critics, who can do nothing but croak their hoarse calumny and wheeze their contempt, have no power to drown the singers with their discordant cries. The true poet is not easily snubbed. He will soar into his native empyrean, and find ample solace in the caresses of the West Wind and the kisses of the Sun. And what a glorious medium he has for retaliation! What satire he can vent in expansive verse! How gallantly he can convey the idea in withering couplets that

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he does not cast his pearls before inappropriate recipients! He remembers the magnificent scorn of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, and sits down with terrible determination burning on his brow to scatter his enemies at the point of his *Swan* or *Waterman*.

“ O who would deem himself a Bard
If quenched by Critic's curses ?
A Poet can retort as hard,
And scorch him in his verses.
'Tis sweet to grasp a glowing pen,
To stab a base Reviewer,
To see him writhe and squirm again,
As if upon a skewer.

“ It is not good to be too mild,
With naught to vent your ire on ;
A Poet is a wayward child,
And gangs his gait, like Byron.
It's very tame to sit and brood,
In reverie to be lost in,
And write to order, bald and crude,
Like Poet Laureate Austin.

“ Nay, let me have a soul on fire,
And sing because I must do ;
And on my Critics wreak my ire,
As some fine day I trust to.
Let him who bears the poet's name
Esteem himself upon it ;
With meekness bear the Critic's blame,
Then—damn him—in a Sonnet.”

I have known one or two bards in different parts of the country, and I protest that they have been exceedingly modest, unassuming persons. They had

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left behind their extreme youth when they wrote verses of dark, melancholy, or erotic warmth, and had grown old enough to believe that life is, on the whole, worth living, and that they could not have suggested many improvements in the Creation, even if an inscrutable Providence had thought of consulting them.

The very youthful poet always seems to be steeped in abysmal gloom (at any rate in his verses), and appears to entertain dismal impressions of the life he is called upon to endure, and he parades his bleeding heart with unfailing regularity in the hospitable columns of the weekly paper. I recall one infatuated youth who thus regaled the readers of a certain weekly in the Midlands. He was haunted by Shelley, and wrote revolutionary stanzas as a self-appointed spokesman of the New Democracy. I often encountered him in unfrequented byways, an attenuated figure with dishevelled hair, and sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, and a general unwashed appearance, his lips moving to some murmurous rhythm, evidently wrestling with some mighty conception which stubbornly refused to be thrown into appropriate rhyme. His midnight lamp often cast its yellow glare upon the darkness long after the orthodox hour. He affected a loose and voluminous neckerchief, and a Byronic collar. I have descried him at pensive eventide perambulating the shadowy woods with one hand thrust into his poetic bosom, while the other made strange gestures to the accompaniment of a voice declaiming the

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blankest verse to the pallid moon. On one occasion he lured me from my bed at one o'clock in the morning to listen to the nightingales in a neighbouring copse.

These are familiar symptoms. In my own never-to-be-forgotten teens I have rhymed, and in halting measure apostrophized the maiden of my heart. I perpetrated sonnets in dreadful secrecy, and almost every other day was safely delivered of couplets. Fortunately, one grows out of these things. I believe there is an inevitable stage in the evolution of every imaginative youth in which he firmly believes himself to be a genius and predestined to undying fame. If he be at all of a literary temperament, this conviction is sure to find expression in the writing of verses. Every spring he breaks forth into a shower of lyrics, and the track of every autumn is marked by elegiac stanzas. It is an interesting phenomenon, and should not be sneered at by the prosaic nor ridiculed by the elderly. It is a time of dreadful seriousness; foolish, inflated, vain, egotistic, self-conscious, no doubt, but still, terribly in earnest. Somebody has very appropriately called it "The Dead Leaves Period." It has its pathetic side—this eager youthfulness, writing with such intensity of broken hearts, blasted hopes, blighted ideals, thwarted ambition, withered love, hopeless passion, of death and the grave, and all the sad things of which tragedy is made. It is a symptom, and will pass. One smiles in after days at the youthful effusions which one turns over unexpectedly in a drawer, and as one reads them a

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hundred vivid hours revive again. But the smile is not one of contempt. It is rather the smile of kindly indulgence which one bestows upon a spoiled child.

Twenty years ago, while prowling round the open bookstalls in Booksellers' Row—now, alas! no more to be trodden by Bohemian feet—I came upon a small thin book of sixty-six pages, which I have perused many times. It bore the title of *Pirated Poems*, was bound in cloth, was priced at sixpence, was just the right size for the pocket; it has beguiled many a half-hour since, and has accompanied me on many journeys. The little book has a singular history. It is described on the title-page as “A Reprint from an Old Book found on a Bookstall,” and opposite the title-page is the following curious note to the Anonymous Author: “The Publishers of this book have produced this volume from an old copy found on a bookstall. They have endeavoured to trace the Author, but have failed, and they undertake to pay the Author (whoever he may be) his share of the profits—if any—arising out of the sale of the same, from the date of this publication and as long as the book shall find favour with the public. The Author must prove his identity to the satisfaction of the Publishers, or to the satisfaction of such arbitrators as they may appoint. March 15, 1890.” I have since been told that the author was found, but who he was I have never been able to discover, beyond the fact, obvious from the poems, that he was an American.

The quality of *Pirated Poems* is such that, on

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coming to the end, the reader emulates *Oliver Twist* and longs for more. The human note predominates, and the verses run through the gamut of many moods. They are distinctly clever, but there is more than cleverness in them. We admire and applaud cleverness, but we are not moved by it. Cleverness soon bores us, unless there be a plus quantity to give it weight and depth. There is a kind of writing which is perpetually straining after effect in thought and expression, and it affects us like an abnormal gymnastic display or the sinuous antics of a contortionist. The modern mind revolts from the common-place, forgetting that the common-place is the staple food of life, and that there is a way of looking even at the commonplace which invests it with the quality of miracle. Writers who are for ever trying to say extraordinary things in an extraordinary way are literary contortionists; they tire us even while they amaze us. The feat is marvellously well done, but the chief marvel is why it should be done at all. The man who lasts and is listened to is the man who is not afraid to say ordinary things in his own way, and that is originality. The true genius is he who can interpret the moods of the average man, and express in a distinctive and memorable way the thoughts and feelings that visit the mind and heart of the multitude.

This has been done with admirable effect by the anonymous author of *Pirated Poems*. Indeed, there is a singular propriety in his anonymity. He represents the Common Crowd. He is own brother to the

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Man in the Street. He has his own attitude towards life—partly cynical, partly reckless, partly satirical, partly jocular ; but this is on the surface, and underneath this protective veneer there are deep currents of thought and tender feeling running in the silences. The superficial reader will likely lay this book down with a careless or a caustic comment, but the sympathetic student of human nature will perceive more than lies on the surface ; he will read between the apparently light and careless lines, and detect undertones of pathos and pity and tenderness as delicate and beautiful as they are sincere and strong. In the opening lines the author has successfully drawn every man's portrait :

“ Within my earthly temple there's a crowd :
There's one of us that's humble, one that's proud ;
There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins,
And one who, unrepentant, sits and grins ;
There's one who loves his neighbour as himself,
And one who cares for naught but fame and pelf
From much corroding care I should be free,
If once I could determine which is Me.”

There is considerable insight in the poem entitled *Mea Culpa*, and the final verse presents an example of the deeper note referred to above. After rehearsing the catalogue of his wayward desires and propensities, he concludes :

“ I am the man that I have been,
And at the final summing
How shall I bear to see sent in
My score—one long shortcoming !

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Unless, when all the saints exclaim
With righteous wrath, ' *Peccavit !* '
Some mighty Friend shall make his claim—
' He suffered, and—*amavit.* ' "

There is a fine bit of satire in the verses called *A Philadelphia Claverhouse*, as keen as it is deserved ; and in the poem that follows it, *In the Elysian Fields*, there is a bit of deep teaching in the final verse which is very seldom emphasized. The author pictures himself arriving in the Elysian Fields, and greeting various characters he specially desires to see, and then he says :

"What? Glad I came? I am, for certain ;
The other's a malarious hole ;
I always pined to draw the curtain,
And somehow knew I had a soul.
The flesh—oh, wasn't it a fetter ?
You'd get so tired of all your schemes.
But here I think I like it better ;
Oh, dear, *how natural it seems !* "

The italics are mine. The most remarkable poem in the volume is one called *Throwing Stones*, in which there is a depth of tenderness and a simple sincerity of expression that touch the heart to tears. It is almost a shame to quote from such a tiny book ; it should be bought, and absorbed at a sitting in a meditative mood when the day's work is done. The Superior Person will not enjoy it. The Pharisee will turn from it with high-sniffing pride and contempt. But the Lover of his Kind will be grateful, recognizing in it the touch of Nature which makes the whole world kin.

On the Spurs of Parnassus

Seventeen years ago there appeared a book of poems which will live a century, and longer. Its title is *A Shropshire Lad*, and its author is A. E. Housman. Poetry is not at its highest level to-day, though there are some promising signs of its revival; but amid the mass of mediocrity this book shines out like a glowing jewel. Good and memorable things have been done by Stephen Phillips, W. B. Yeats, William Watson, Alfred Noyes, Henry Newbolt, John Masefield, and others; but I venture to think that *A Shropshire Lad* will outlive them all.

In bulk it is small—there are not a hundred pages in the whole volume—but genius shines on every page, and the lyrical charm of the book throws a spell over the reader. The form is so exquisite, the language so simple, the thought so lucid, that at first these poems have an almost puerile look; but one cannot read far without perceiving that the form is the result of the finest art, the language studied and pruned and refined to the last point of perfection, while the thought often cuts down to the very quick of life. By the simplest of means the imagination is kindled; a picture is etched upon the mind in a telling phrase; in a couple of lines a thought is suggested that leaves an indelible impression; the reader feels that he is all the time in touch with reality. In these sixty-three brief lyrics Life speaks to him in thrilling and poignant tones, and he knows he has been close to the living heart of things.

The matter of the poems ranges over the three or four things which are of perennial interest: Love,

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Nature, Sport, Patriotism, Life's Vicissitudes and Ironies. The writer tells of the local patriotism stirred by war, and pictures the setting out of the young recruit from his native town. He speaks in poignant phrase of those who return no more. His sympathy goes out readily to cricket and hunting and the games of the countryside. He loves the open air, and all the sweet scents and sounds of Nature. The wind from the Weald blows through his pages. The beautiful landscapes of Shropshire are revealed to us in a line or two of wonderfully suggestive descriptive touches. There is no elaboration anywhere: the thing is done as if by magic—the magic of a phrase. We see the winding Severn slowly meandering between green banks, and the aspen leaves quivering in the passing breeze. We see the golden bloom of the gorse; the hedges white with hawthorn snow; the lush meadows over which the bells chime faint and mellow at evening; the quiet red-roofed hamlets peeping out among the trees; the spread of wide skies; the cloud shadows that wander across the valley.

Then there comes out of the poems the Cry of Life. We see the red coats of the huntsmen and the uniform of the soldiery, and hear the shouts from the field and the roll of drums. We hear farewells being bawled down the village street, and all the laughter, chaff, and chatter of the local gossips. We see lad and lass strolling through field and wood, and witness the plighting of vows; we see, too, the swift tragedy of jealousy, and in our fancy we catch

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a sudden glimpse of the black flag floating grimly from the walls of Shrewsbury Gaol. The panorama of daily experience in quiet country towns and villages passes before us, and so vivid is the poet's verse that it is as though we were on a walking tour and saw the life that he describes. Mr. Housman has a rare touch for natural description. Witness these two verses from *Reveill  * :

- “ Wake : the silver dusk returning
 Up the beach of darkness brims,
 And the ship of sunrise burning
 Strands upon the eastern rims.
- “ Wake : the vaulted shadow shatters,
 Trampled to the floor it spanned,
 And the tent of night in tatters
 Straws the sky-pavilioned land.”

The poet can describe a quarrel and its upshot in vivid, swift, and telling lines :

- “ The sun burns on the half-mown hill,
 By now the blood is dried ;
 And Maurice among the hay lies still,
 And my knife is in his side.”

He has a weirdly impressive piece about an execution in Shrewsbury Gaol, in which there is one verse full of imagination :

- “ So here I'll watch the night and wait
 To see the morning shine,
 *When he will hear the stroke of eight
 And not the stroke of nine.*”

The italics are mine. In those two lines one seems to be actually present at the final moment. There is

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an exquisite lyric on *Bredon Hill*, which sings itself into the heart by its own melody :

“ In summer-time on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear ;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.

“ Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.”

The lover speaks to his lass of the merry peal that will ring from the steeple on their wedding-day ; but alas ! for human hopes :

“ But when the snows at Christmas
On Bredon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone.”

“ They tolled the one bell only,
Groom there was none to see,
The mourners followed after,
And so to church went she,
And would not wait for me.”

There is a byway on the Slopes of Parnassus in America that I have often walked in, provided by Colonel John Hay in *Pike County Ballads*. They made their first appearance in book form in 1871, but were originally contributed to the *New York Tribune*, to which the Colonel was then an editorial

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writer. Colonel Hay's poems share something of his adventurous career and his robust personality, while they reflect in a striking manner the spirit of the strong and independent people of the rivers, hills, and plains. To the mere man of the library these poems come with something like a shock; to the dweller in clubs and drawing-rooms they offend by their violence and their breezy blasphemies; but to the man whose heart retains a breath of the primitive, and who understands the Call of the Wild, they are a natural product of the bracing air and of the honest, simple folk they represent. Colonel Hay finds his material in crude forms, and has a sure touch in dealing with the raw, rough characters who have not become the spoiled darlings of a luxurious civilization. The open-air life of the plains does at any rate breed strong men, whose robust physique puts to shame the anæmic products of city streets and slums. The mind of the dweller in tents works in a straight line, with a clumsy but glorious simplicity; he is not visited with the cynical thoughts and the shallow doubts that are born in the brain of the smart man on 'Change. Colonel Hay would have some difficulty in making a poem out of the superficial smartness and showy vulgarity of a Society crowd, but his clear eye is not an instant deceived by the rugged, rude, blaspheming manhood of a Jim Bludso. Jim Bludso, of the *Prairie Belle*, is one of those characters in whom Colonel Hay delights. Jim was an engineer on the *Belle*, and as tough and rough a customer as ever breathed. He

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was lurid in his talk and loose in his morals, "but he never funk'd, and he never lied."

"And if ever the *Prairie Belle* took fire,—
A thousand times he swore,
He'd hold her nozzle agin the bank
Till the last soul got ashore."

The day came round, and the fire with it, and Bludso kept his word.

"Through the hot black breath of the burnin' boat,
Jim Bludso's voice was heard,
And they all had trust in his cussedness,
And knowed he would keep his word.
And, sure's you're born, they all got off
Afore the smoke-stacks fell,—
And Bludso's ghost went up alone
In the smoke of the *Prairie Belle*.

"He weren't no saint—but at judgement
I'd run my chance with Jim
'Longside of some pious gentlemen
That wouldn't shook hands with him.
He seen his duty, a dead-sure thing,
And went for it thar and then ;
And Christ ain't a-going to be too hard
On a man that died for men."

That conclusion is entirely characteristic of the spirit of *Pike County Ballads*. I have heard an eminent theologian denounce that conclusion publicly as drivelling sentimentality, which is a conclusion entirely characteristic of that particular eminent theologian. That is what comes of looking at the world out of a library window, and living in the fourth century.

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The style of these *Ballads* (there are but six of them altogether) is the quaint irregular measure, freely peppered with slang and dialect terms, so frequently belonging to many American poems. Bret Harte has made us familiar with it, and it is wonderfully effective. It seems to bring out the pathos and the peculiar humour of the story. It would be hard to find a more effective example of this than in the yarn about *Little Breeches*. Little Breeches is a four-year-old child who is carried off by a runaway waggon and gets lost in a snowstorm. The anxious search-party find him at last, safe and warm among the lambs in a little shed. The conclusion is again a characteristic one :

“How did he get thar? Angels.
He could never have walked in that storm;
They just scooped down and toted him
To whar it was safe and warm.
And I think that saving a little child,
And fotching him to his own,
Is a derved sight better business
Than loafing around the throne.”

It is things like these that (as Lowell says) “tear down to the primitive rock.” The turns of thought and expression are startling, and in form they may even seem blasphemous; but they are redeemed from any suspicion of irreverence by their depth of feeling and simple sincerity. They “find” in a soft part every man who has not sold himself to the conventional and become petrified by the orthodox. Colonel Hay has a sure hand for discovering and

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disclosing the redeeming element in a rough man's character. It is a better thing to do than to go about with no good word to speak of one's neighbour, and I fancy it is a lesson he must have learned from the Son of Man.

CHAPTER VIII

IN A BROWN STUDY

WHEN a man is in that quiet, reflective state of mind known as a Brown Study, a great many jostling, vagrant thoughts visit him. In this chapter I want to set down a few of those thoughts which have invaded me when thinking over books and the writing of them.

I have always envied the man who can write a good tale. He is one of the richest benefactors of the human race. How much one owes to writers like Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, Dumas, Stevenson, Hugo, George Eliot, and all the great makers of romance and laughter! They have not only whiled away many a pleasant hour, and lightened our solitude, and peopled our mind with a host of characters, many of whom are more real and sometimes more acceptable to us than the folk we meet with every day, but they have made life itself a brighter, sweeter, more interesting, more tolerable, and more wonderful thing. It is not merely that they have provided us with a series of stirring adventures, or mirth-provoking incidents, or memorable situations, nor that they have painted

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for us many a striking background and unfolded a panorama of scenes, beautiful, impressive, or grotesque, though even this is matter for gratitude and congratulation; but it is chiefly that they have opened the pages of the Book of Human Nature, and laid bare for us the mysteries of love and hate, hope and fear, greed and jealousy, sorrow and suffering, quiet happiness and secret longing. They are the magicians who hold the keys of the kingdom of tears and laughter. These are among the giants, the seers who know the heart.

But the lesser prophets are welcome too, so long as they are true to life and give us honestly of their best. He who can write a good short story is as real a benefactor as the artist who works on a larger canvas. It is said that every man has at least one book in him, if he only had the skill and the will to shape it into words. Were it but the story of his own life, however obscure and commonplace, so that he were sincere in the expression of his thoughts and feelings, and true to his own experience, it would be a document of some value, and worth the writing and the reading. But there's the rub! We can all feel, we all have thoughts, we all have some kind of experience, but we cannot all shape our life in words, we have not all the fairy gift of utterance, we cannot all speak with tongues, and, alas! we are not all sincere. Moreover, it needs some imagination to tell a tale with impressiveness and power and verisimilitude, and most of us are singularly lacking in that priceless possession.

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I read once in a weekly paper what struck me as a very wise and true saying. It was something to this effect: "For the great writer, stories are close at hand. They are in his own house and in the next. He does not need to travel. What he has to do is to show us the invisible in the visible." How easy to say! how difficult to perform! Yet there is the real secret of the art of writing stories. To see the invisible in the visible—is not that a gift of the gods? I believe this faculty of insight is one which may be cultivated. It simply means sympathy. So many people could write, and write well, but they are not ready to write about the things and the folk they know—they will not write of that corner of the world and that bit of life with which they are familiar; they think they must travel to accumulate new facts, and to precipitate fresh experiences, and to arouse unusual emotions; and so, not having the chance to travel, they invent impossible incidents and introduce us to artificial characters, and the whole effect is that of a puppet-show, of life seen by limelight.

A friend of mine once wrote a tale, and submitted it to the late Dr. Parker, of the City Temple, for an opinion. I have never forgotten his criticism. "The author (he wrote) is contemptuous. He cannot see the lovely in the unlovely. Peradventure for a certain kind of clique he might die, but not for the whole world. He wants expansion. He cannot see a possible archangel in a greengrocer. He should soak himself in Mary E. Wilkins. The author is un-

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doubtedly talented, observant, and graphic. At present he is intellectually young, socially invidious, and wholly unacquainted with humour and pathos. His story as a rattling succession of action is quite above the average, but it has no soul, no God, no far-away sky and outlook." I wish that criticism could be printed in capitals, and placed on the desk of every writer of stories. It would redeem his sentences from the merely superficial, and save him from thinking that life is chiefly an affair of chatter.

If a man would only look into his own heart and write, we should have something deeper than casual observation. Why should he always be in search of the extravagant, the unusual, the bizarre? Why does he confuse novelty with eccentricity? That fine writer of stories, Henry Seton Merriman, says: "The only novelty is the Human Heart—Central Man. That is never stale, and there are depths still unexplored, heights still unattained, warm rivers of love, cold streams of hatred, and vast plains where strange motives grow." He is right. And there is no need for a man to be obscure when he writes. What I once heard Dr. Parker say of preaching will apply with but little change to the writing of books: "Kind words, loving thoughts, experience translated into holy and tender language, deep study of the Bible, expressed in the simplest terms—these will touch the broken heart of the world when classic expression and sweltering climaxes will be forgotten or despised."

A good many people have tried to define Inspira-

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tion, but it cannot be said that their efforts have been very successful. Sir Joshua Reynolds, critically examining a certain picture, suddenly made an expressive gesture and exclaimed, "It wants—*that!*" What "that" was he wisely left undefined, but we all know what he meant. In pictures, in music, in sculpture, in drama, in poetry, in stories, in sermons, in persons, there is a subtle Something that lifts the commonplace into a mysterious light and bathes it in the atmosphere of genius. The thing is quite palpable, and quite indefinable. It is the strangest, most beautiful, most alluring, most wonderful thing in the world. The very same sentence may in the mouth of one man be dull and unimpressive, and in the mouth of another be almost a revelation.

If those who attempt to define inspiration are foolish, those who wait for it are mad. If I were an artist, I would depict Inspiration as a weirdly beautiful female figure, half veiled in golden mist, beckoning to the heights of a mountain peak suffused in the rose of dawn. Wait for her? Certainly not; she is waiting for me. A man must not expect to be wooed (though in these emancipated times he may expect anything), it is his business to woo. And if his fair enchantress seems to mock his first advances, and escapes from his presence just as he is about to embrace her, he must not sit down and sigh and talk about the fickleness of woman; he must gird up his loins for the chase, risking and enduring all things in the eagerness of his desire and the greatness of his hope.

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I frankly confess I have often been tempted both to define and to wait for inspiration. But that was in my callow youth, and before I discovered that inspiration is not an It, but a She. The feminine is incalculable and indefinable, and to wait for her is to insure solitude all your days. A writing man is sorely tempted to wait for inspiration. He says he does not feel in the mood for writing, and thereupon lays down his pen and seeks the insidious comfort of a couch and a magazine and a cigar. But it is a mistake. A great many plausible arguments can be brought to the rescue of the idea of waiting for inspiration; but I am most reluctantly compelled to admit that they are all fraudulent and deadly. A man really cannot afford to wait for inspiration unless he is a person of considerable private means, or has sure and certain expectations from his maiden aunt. I am driven to believe more and more in the inspiration of necessity. A man knows that a certain thing has to be done by a certain time; if he be worth his salt he will thereupon set his teeth and doggedly go to work. I know all about the tyranny of moods. I know all about that distracting, bewitching, two-faced minx, Procrastination. I know all that can be said in disparagement of the poor hack who sits down at his desk at a particular hour every morning or night, and, Trollope-like, sets himself deliberately to turn out a certain number of words or pages every hour. There is undoubtedly something cruelly mechanical about the Trollope method, working with one eye on the clock; but

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even this is better than sitting down in the forlorn hope that inspiration will visit the vacant brain, and that if one only waits long enough one's pen will be endowed with almost Shakespearean energy and power.

It is possible to create a mood for writing. In a small and humble way I have done it myself. It may be useless to wait for inspiration, but it is by no means useless to set your sail to catch the breeze when it comes. A mood can be coaxed and cajoled and even flattered into being. I call the literary mood "Mary," and imagine myself to be an amorous swain, singing "Tell me, Mary, how to woo thee!" Sometimes Mary does not deign to respond; she merely tosses her dainty head, and tells me in action, if not in words, not to be such a fool. But I am not to be intimidated or suppressed by these symptoms of disdain. She must be mine, and I lay my plan of campaign accordingly. If my pen refused to work immediately, I used to make a meal off the end of it, and sit staring blankly for hours at a virgin sheet of paper. The dinner bell rang, and not a word had been written. It was too provoking. But now, when in such dire straits, and a famine of ideas is threatened, I either get a good stimulating book and create a literary atmosphere by half an hour's reading, or else go out for a swinging walk over the hills where I can get a blow and a view; and the sheer delight of the physical exercise stirs up the torpid brain to activity. Inspiration never comes to dyspepsia or morbid brooding, or to a man "frowsting" by the fire.

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How do thoughts come? How do you account for the origin and succession of ideas? When you sit down before a blank sheet and dip your pen in the ink-pot, do you know exactly what you are going to say and how you are going to say it? When you have put down your first sentence, do you know what your next is going to be? How do you begin, continue, and end? These are samples of questions I have sometimes been asked, and I cannot answer them. Probably my answer, were I so far to forget myself as to offer one, would be scouted as preposterous. There is only one possible counsel to all literary aspirants: Know what you want to say, and say it in the best way at your command.

Of course, that leaves the novice very much where he was before. Personally, I believe in strange voices, wandering winds, whispering birds, dreams, visions, brownies, fairies, elves, goblins, pixies, Pucks, and Ariels. Science and civilization and mental snobbery are against them, but I care not a button. These Invisibles are in my blood. I have a familiar spirit who whispers things into my ear, and I am sorry I cannot oblige you by a temporary loan, even at a highly remunerative figure. Some things are without money and without price. I suppose I shall be set down as utterly beyond rational argument when I solemnly declare that I can always write best when I imagine myself to be somebody else. I can't explain it, but it is sober fact. The very few best things I have ever done in writing have been

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done in character, so to speak; and when I have taken up the thing to read it in after days I have honestly enjoyed it, and could hardly be persuaded it was my own handiwork. Probably the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the many-sidedness of human nature. Most men have at least two entirely distinct selves; in many of us there are far more than two. This accounts for many seeming incongruities. Who would believe it possible that the same hand which wrote

“God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform,
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm,”

also wrote

“John Gilpin was a citizen
Of credit and renown,
A train-band captain eke was he
Of famous London town”?

Who would imagine that beneath the rather heavy exterior of that sober mathematician and orthodox curate, the Reverend Charles Dodgson, lay the inspired nonsense-monger, Lewis Carrol? Some people considered the late Sir Henry Irving to be great as a tragedian, and some considered him greater as a comedian. Is it not hard to conceive of *Hamlet* and *Jingle* being rolled up in the same man? I have heard Dr. Parker preach sermons of the most intense and searching solemnity, and sermons which were almost rollicking in their irony and banter and sarcasm, as he took off the foibles

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of human nature and answered the gibes of the scornful.

And yet there are actually people who seriously complain because they never can tell what we are going to do or say next! They say we do not give them notice! How can we? The simple fact is we do not give ourselves notice. The inspiration of the moment may indeed amaze our friends, but it is an equal surprise to ourselves. Perhaps it may sometimes make the judicious grieve, but nobody really loves the judicious. They are of that vast and depressing company "who never would be missed!"

It is the fashion in these strange days to print ideas, reminiscences, diaries, letters, notebooks, which are supposed to have emanated from the brain of a dear and deceased friend, whose last act was to bequeath his "papers" to the admiring comrade of his heart, and in this bashful manner to offer our own vagrant musings to the world. It is an interesting and ingenious method of communicating a piece of one's elusive personality to mankind. It encourages one to think more buoyantly of an age so tentative and modest. Such books appear to have been written in a brown study, when musing by the winter fire.

A book of this kind that interested me very much is *The Comments of Bagshot*, by J. A. Spender. It purports to be "edited," but no doubt Bagshot and Spender are interchangeable. The book is disconnected and abrupt, consisting of isolated sentences

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crystallizing some personal opinion, or summarizing a character, or embodying a thought, or reflecting a mood, or offering a criticism. There is no artistry in it, save perhaps in the shaping of some of these isolated sentences, many of which are finely chiselled and clean-cut as a cameo ; it is what the title suggests, a sort of running commentary on life and character.

Unless a book of this kind is very well done, it is tedious and foolish ; before one has got through half a dozen pages one is sick of the man and his blessed opinions. But when it is supremely well done, as in the case of *Bagshot*, the result is amusing, stimulating, and edifying in a high degree. There is a type of book which gives a man a kind of electric shock, and his ideas are set jostling and seething together in a ferment of excitement. Such a book is Emerson's *Essays*, and one can hardly read a page without flying to pencil and notebook to record a train of thought started by this wizard of literary electricity. *Bagshot* has something of this effect, too. He is provocative. He gives the brain a buffet. He will comment quietly and pleasantly enough for a while, and then suddenly he begins to play upon one's mental vision like summer lightning, and one sees a whole province of life lit up for a single moment by the vivid ray, or gets a glimpse into some obscure valley of thought or some unexplored backwater of experience as the bright light flashes over it.

Some of his summaries of character are particularly graphic and convincing. He remarks : "C—— has

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the courage which bears an intolerable toothache with fortitude for fear of going to the dentist." We have all met the man of whom he says, "Cut him open, and you will find a clergyman inside," and we are all painfully familiar with the man whose conversation is "like the noise of a train in a tunnel—one idea deafening you with its echo." Do we not recognize this portrait? "William is in chronic rebellion against other people's experience. He is like one of those climbers who will go up a mountain the wrong way simply because other people have gone up the right way before him." I think I know these two men also: "Denys has a nature warmed from within, on which the snow will not lie." "Lewis's life is an incessant tobogganing, which means that he spends two-thirds of his time in getting his bob-sled up-hill."

Bagshot is one of those happy beings who are always saying things one would like to have said first—if one could! Take these, for example: "To call themselves 'miserable sinners' is with many people a kind of religious good manners, just as a man inscribes himself 'your humble servant.'" "In the idealist the sense of sin passes into a passion for perfection. Instead of 'I am unworthy,' he says, 'This is unworthy of me.'" "Mem. for humanitarians: Sympathy, like strength, must be harboured. He who pities the whole world will relieve no one." "It is only the landlubber who makes a boast of the fact that he is never sick at sea. The *homo sanus* ought to be sick at sea if he is accus-

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tomed to live on dry land." (Give me your hand, Bagshot!)

What a comment is this on the gaming-house at Monte Carlo: "The lights of the Casino shut out the stars." And this: "Charity believeth all things—but so, unfortunately, do envy and malice." And again: "Persistently doing what you don't want to do under the idea that you are sacrificing yourself for others may so embitter your character as to make you intolerable to others." I would commend this comment also to many good people of my acquaintance: "You can't enjoy a holiday because you have to go back to work next week, nor a rose because it will fade to-morrow, nor your robust middle-age because you are going to be old and decrepit some day. The ground is covered with flowers, and you sigh and say the grave is underneath. *There is no help for you.*" (The italics are mine.) Bagshot knows something about men and women, and that is different from knowing something about human nature. The odd problem is more interesting than the mass. It is this knowledge of men and women—the individual puzzle, the separate personality—that makes living books and impressive speeches and arresting sermons.

This is the place in which to say something about Bagshot's niece. This is the reference passage: "If I say to my niece Molly that two and two make four, she consents, but is unconvinced. But if I show her this little formula: $1\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} + 1\frac{3}{4} + \frac{1}{4} = 4$, she is at once all alive with interest, and sits down to

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work it out, and proclaims in triumph that it is so. From a hard and dull statement of fact it has become a problem and an intrigue, and here she is in her element." I do not know Molly, but I love her. If I met her I should be constrained to lay all my wordly goods (my carpet bag) at her feet. She is the sort of girl who keeps the world from becoming a stagnant pool and a man from going to the dogs. She may not be beautiful, according to the musical comedy type; nor highly domesticated, after the *Home Chat* standard; and she is certainly not a blue stocking or a militant suffragette; but I am sure she has bright eyes, indicative of vivacity within; and she is athletic, and would not think about her ankles when she gets over a stile; and she could discuss a story if she couldn't write one; she could keep up her end of a conversation with some spirit; she would be charming, provoking, mischievous, tantalizing, merry, generous, sympathetic, kind—

"A creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles."

Molly is a protest against boredom, cynicism, and pedestrianism in life and thought—that trinity of evil which would rule all romance out of the world, and make a mock of fancy and fairyland, and reduce all poetry to the solidest and most indigestible prose.

Do two and two really make four? Possibly; but who cares? Four *what*? That is the exciting question. Here are two elephants and two carving-

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knives, they are undoubtedly "four," but four what? Bring all your philosophy to bear upon that innocent question, and it will set your mind on a fine gallop. We have given arithmetic a very appropriate Christian name; we have called it Simple Arithmetic. That is exactly what it is—on paper. But when we come to *things*—ah! then we sit down, and knit our brows, and run our fingers distractedly through our hair, and begin to wonder. I suppose logic is a very excellent study, at any rate a most learned and painstaking professor once strove (how long ago?) to make me believe so, and occasionally I have found it to be a capital crutch. But when I come to a chasm in thought which makes me dizzy to look into, I cannot stand tottering on the edge with my brain all a-swim while I laboriously forge my bridge of reasoning on which to cross it; I simply take my courage in both hands and jump. Of course, it is not an academic process, and entirely unorthodox, but it is natural—which is one of the things that are more excellent. Still, it may be frankly admitted that crutches may be useful in the absence of wings.

Life is indeed a problem and an intrigue. There is a secret in things, there is a mystery in the human heart, and that is what makes religion. Logic never throws a stone into the depths of wonder, setting ripples astir that go flowing on and on until they come to the edge of the world; but that is what Life is doing every day. Arithmetic never sets imagination at work, but algebra does; the unknown quantity doth work like madness in the brain.

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Wonder is childlike, no doubt, but not therefore despicable, still less ridiculous; it may be the vestibule of worship. Superstition is irrational, but not therefore a theme for denunciation or contempt; it may be the beginning of spirituality.

I would rather be superstitious than be a materialist. I feel a subtle kinship with the people who do not like to sit down thirteen at table, who shrink from crossing knives and spilling salt and walking under ladders and breaking looking-glasses and travelling on a Friday, who see the dryad in the oak and the elves in the glen, and the goblins in the black maw of the mountain cave. It may be my partially Cornish blood, for Cornish folk are among the most superstitious in the world; but there it is, and if blood be thicker than water, it is certainly more potent than reasoning. Temperament accounts for the quality of a man's creed far more than logical argument, and I do not see that it is any the less worthy or valuable for that fact. The man who can wholly account for his creed is a mystery of mysteries. He can put it all down on a piece of paper, and say, "This is what I believe: two and two are four." And he carries it about with him in his waistcoat pocket as if it were a season ticket.

Molly's formula makes all the stories and dramas and poems of the world. Life is full of the unexpected, and the making of every story, poem, drama, sermon, is the element of surprise. You want to write a story: how do you propose to begin? Well, I propose to construct an elaborate plot which

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shall preserve the "unities" and be an artistic whole from start to finish, and then. . . . Why, that's just two and two are four over again ! Let me know what your characters are ; the plot can take care of itself. The men and women must come first, and if your characters do not sometimes run away with you and turn your beautiful symmetrical plot into temporary chaos, you are a pedestrian author, and you write with your eye on the clock, and think of how much you are likely to get for every thousand words. Pot-boilers can be made that way, but you cannot make comedies and tragedies so. The best books, the best plays, the best sermons, always leave you with the impression that there is no particular reason why they should end when they do. You are left with the impression that you have been privileged to overhear a very fine suggestive talk, and that the talk could go on quite well when you are not there, or that you have been looking in upon a scene which must of necessity be "continued in our next." It is the impression of a great reserve of power.

There are some people who do not appear to have any hidden depths in them. They never remind you of the unknown quantity. They have the soulless regularity of a machine ; every movement can be calculated ; they say good-morning to each other regularly, read the newspaper decorously, do their duty by their numerous progeny, walk their daily beat with sober step, eat and sleep, and die decently in their beds in the end. They are a blessed multitude. It is not that they have no hidden depths ;

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it is rather that they have never become thrillingly aware of them. If they had, they would often be incalculable and eccentric; they would sometimes find it difficult to take themselves and life quite seriously; they would have unaccountable impulses to do preposterous things at solemn and inopportune moments; they would be in mortal terror of saying things in company that would turn the assembly into stone; they would be of the society of those who find it an exceeding ticklish task to live with themselves.

Well, Molly, my dear, that love of the problem and intrigue of yours has run away with me, and if I pursue it farther I shall be saying things which can only be said safely in the mystic circle of friendship. Fortunately, there is a faith and a philosophy which a man may have to himself before God! Whenever I hear a man solemnly boasting that two and two make four, or blandly inquiring whether he must forgive his brother "until seven times," I shall think of your bright eyes and see the tricky Puck that lurks in their brown depths, and a dexterous use of my pocket-handkerchief will be needed to save my sober countenance from betrayal.

Sometimes, while in the midst of a brown study, a book catalogue will be thrust into my hands, and it induces a browner study than ever. In the fall of the year my waste-paper basket (luckily of vast cubic dimensions) steadily fills to the brim with catalogues of books. They descend from the four quarters of

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heaven. These sybilline leaves come fluttering to my door, not in twos and threes, but in battalions, making a positive Vallombrosa of my study floor and table. They come borne upon the fitful winds of the autumn publishing season, beginning about the middle of September, blowing steadily during October, increasing in violence throughout November, culminating in a gale on the verge of Christmas. After that there is a lull until the spring, when there is a renewed but feebler and briefer agitation of the literary elements.

There is much to interest the book-lover in a catalogue. There is such extraordinary variety in it, and there is a pleasure merely in running the eye down the list. Yet there is something pathetic, too, in these hosts of volumes prospecting for readers. When a catalogue arrives, stating on its cover that herein is detailed the library of the late Mr. or Reverend or Doctor So-and-so, I sit down to its perusal with accentuated melancholy, and fall to wondering. What sort of man was the late owner of these now vagrant volumes? The catalogue will tell me, for few things are a better index to character and mental idiosyncrasy than a man's library. Was the reverend gentleman (hateful phrase!) a theologian? A scholar? A poet? Had he any outlook beyond his groaning shelves? Were his books fetters or windows? Were they his masters or his servants? Was he an echo, or a voice? Did he ever rise in his wrath and fling an offending author

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to the other side of the room? Did he ever lay violent hands upon some impious writer and consign him to the flames, watching the holocaust with righteous yet uproarious glee? Had he any favourites in his literary harem? Was he a man, or was he only a liveried and learned functionary, with no distinction apart from his dog-collar and his degree? Browsing and brooding over the catalogue of the dead man's books, I ponder these things, gazing frequently into the fire, and trying to run his character to earth in some specially speaking corner of his library.

"Of making many books there is no end." One wonders what the ancient writer would have said could he have foreseen this day. Indeed, these recurring catalogues, these spring and autumn book-lists, are a prolific source of wondering. Who reads all these books? Who writes them? The latter question is the more interesting, if only for the reason that it is a harder thing to write a book than to read one—as a rule! The reader can always put it down.

In our time the whole world seems to have gone a-scribbling. There is now, in very truth, a "mob of gentlemen who write with ease." And ladies, too. I look with growing amazement at the ever-extending fiction-list year by year. It is not to be regretted. So long as human nature remains what it is, "truth embodied in a tale" will always enter in at lowly doors. The only fear is that it may not always be

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truth. It would seem as if titles must soon be exhausted. Certainly the plots are; for it is not possible to construct more than some half-dozen plots or situations. The novelty is only in the combination, the rearrangement, the setting. A conjuror once told me that there are only some seven or eight tricks in the whole world, all the rest are adaptations of these few originals. It is so in music. There are but eight notes, yet all the harmonies of the world are founded thereon. There are but a few primary colours, but they have produced all the art galleries of Europe. A writer of tales need not despair because he cannot evolve a new and original plot. The mark of the great writer is in his distinctive style and his distinctive handling of time-worn themes. The sign of originality is not to be always striving after novelty, but to say old things in your own way. There is nothing else for it. The only new thing is Human Nature, yet it is the same age as God. The sun is old, the morning is new. Let the fiction-writer recognize this, and he is comparatively safe—safe, at least, from the futile aspiration after an originality which is only excess, eccentricity, absurdity, topsy-turvydom, megalomania—an over-weening desire to stand in the limelight. There is nothing so boring as mere cleverness; nothing so wearisome as perpetual smartness. The only real novelty is the commonplace, and that is the only thing that never tires. One grows weary of confectionery; one never tires of bread and water.

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We get sick of invented situations in which the folk talk epigrams and blaze in paradoxes. We come to know in time that the human heart is the one thing that is never stale. Let me have Adam and Eve, and I will guarantee not to be dull, though I cannot be original.

The fiction list is interesting, but the column in the catalogue to which I turn with most eagerness is that where the biographies are detailed. Biography has for many years been my favourite form of reading. What could be more fascinating as a study than to know just how men and women behaved themselves in face of the bewildering mystery of things, what they thought and said and did on this tormented stage of time? Letters especially are intimate documents, and tell one more about a man than a dozen pages of description. The letters of Robert Louis Stevenson give a far more vivid and convincing picture of him than the official biography. He turned his mind inside out to his friends, and the result is quickening, enlivening, entrancing, inspiring in the highest degree. The chief fascination of the Bible is that it is a Book of Lives. The glory of Shakespeare is his gallery of characters, and the marvel of Dickens is that he drew men and women whose names have become household words. Biography makes one rich in the lore of human nature and human life. It quickens our psychological interest, and gives us an insight into the extraordinary com-

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plexity of things. One hesitates more and more to judge men after reading biography. There are so many wheels within wheels. "To know all is to pardon all," says the French proverb; and, indeed, if it be not used to bolster up a weak sentimentalism, we may accept it as a working principle.

The catalogue does not offer much encouragement in the region of poetry. The twentieth century still awaits its poetic interpreter. Meanwhile, there is no lack of pretty fancies, pleasant verses, sweet refrains, musical and even memorable lines put forth in modest volumes, usually at prohibitive prices. It is a mistake to charge a high price for poetry, for although at its best it is the noblest form of speech, and worth all that we can give in gratitude to one who quickens the mind and consoles the heart and finds a voice for the inarticulate, yet it is "caviare to the general," and if it is to be popularized, it must be produced at a popular price, especially when most volumes of poems are of such modest dimensions. One cannot be too grateful for *The Canterbury Poets*, or *The Muses' Library*, or *The World's Classics*, or *The Oxford Pocket Poets*, or *Everyman*. In all these you may find the greatest poets at a figure within reach of the most restricted pocket. It is the poets now writing who often cannot get a hearing because their volumes are too dear, and one does not care to give four or five shillings for an unknown. A brave attempt has been made to obviate this difficulty by Mr. Elkin Mathews in his

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Vigo Cabinet Series, and for a shilling you may possess yourself of some of the most charming and characteristic of present-day writers of verse in this set of excellent little books. One of them—*Rainbows and Witches*, by Will Ogilvie — I have had more delight from than from any of the later singers.

CHAPTER IX

A RECENT BYWAY

AN enterprising editor took a plebiscite the other day among a number of schools for young ladies as to their favourite author, and I was interested to observe that the name of Henry Seton Merriman was an easy first. I confess to a feeling of wonder at this, but, then, girls are always upsetting one's calculations. They are a law unto themselves. On second thoughts, I do not know why I should have wondered, for there is a masculine quality, a virile dominance in Merriman, which is dear to the feminine heart. The young women of to-day do not sigh and languish; they do not cast down their eyes when mankind approaches them; they are not addicted to scent-bottles and sofa cushions; these traits belong to a more remote and demure age. The damsel of the present hunts, rides, shoots, swims, plays hockey and golf, tennis and cricket, swings Indian clubs, and expands her lungs with Sandow's exerciser—in short, does all that her brothers do—and a little more. She laughs right merrily at her sisters of a century ago, whose recreations were chiefly of a mild indoor kind, and

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whose outdoor gymnastics were limited to a walk round a buttercuppy field, or to a game with a soft ball and a still softer companion. And it is precisely this larger freedom and saner outlook which has enabled her to appreciate such a strong masculine writer as Merriman. I fancy Charlotte Brontë has had her share in bringing about this emancipation. Her Jane Eyres and Shirleys were not girls to be trifled with.

Among the crowd of recent lesser writers the name of Merriman stands deservedly high. At the time of his death, in 1903, he was very widely read, and had reached the height of his achievement. His fame was purely literary, for he loathed the modern arts of self-advertisement, and resolutely declined to be photographed, interviewed, and exploited by an aggressive Press. A more retiring writer never lived. Most writing men thirst for public applause and court the blaze of notoriety; Merriman shunned it. He did not haunt the clubs; he was not received at dinners. Nobody knew his opinions on the writer's art, or the methods of his own work. The general reader knew him simply from his books. Few were even aware that "Merriman" was only a pen-name, and served still further to veil the retiring personality of Hugh Stowell Scott. A singular character indeed in a publicity-loving age!

His books are characteristic of the man. None of them burst upon the reading world by storm; none of them were boomed into prominence; none of

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them owed anything to editorial patronage. They crept into notice, but without gathering a vast multitude around them. A discerning few read them, noted them, and duly passed them on to others; some learned to look eagerly for each successive volume from the same reticent but pungent pen. He wrote with extreme labour and care, visiting the scenes which he made the background of his stories, pruning his style with the most assiduous concentration, and paying close attention to dialogue, often re-writing it many times. He was not by any means a great writer, but he was always interesting; he could tell a story lucidly and with considerable power, and in certain isolated scenes and episodes he handled his material in a masterly fashion. He was always a vigorous and healthy writer, and could be depended upon not to leave an unpleasant taste or make a dismal and sinister impression.

He had not much humour; what there was of humour was of the ironical and slightly cynical type. He developed some extremely irritating mannerisms, amongst which may be mentioned a tendency to prosy moralizing and a fatal fondness for epigrammatic comments by the way—faults which delay the progress of the story and sadly mar the artistic effect. Some of these epigrams are distinctly good, some are hopelessly feeble; but, good or bad, it is a pity they are there at all. No doubt it is true that the greatest writers have betrayed this tendency to moralizing. Thackeray did it; Dickens has pages of it; George Eliot is full of it;

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Charlotte Brontë is often guilty. But we can accept from genius what we cannot applaud in mediocrity; and though Merriman cannot be described as mediocre, he certainly may not be ranked as a genius.

One can appreciate and linger over such bursts of splendid rhetoric as this, from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*: "Oh, lovers of power! Oh, mitred aspirants for this world's kingdoms! an hour will come, even to you, when it will be well for your hearts—pausing faint at each broken beat—that there is a Mercy beyond human compassions, a Love stronger than this death which even you must face, and before it, fall; a Charity more potent than any sin, even yours; a Pity which redeems worlds—nay, absolves priests." But the kind of thing that constantly meets one in Merriman is a passage like this: "One finds that, after all, in this world of deceit we are most of us that which we look like. You, madam, look thirty-five to a day, although your figure is still youthful, your hair untouched by grey, your face unseamed by care. You may look in your mirror and note these accidents with satisfaction; you may feel young, and indulge in the pastimes of youth without effort. But you are thirty-five. We know it. We who look at you can see it for ourselves, and, if you could only be brought to believe it, we think no worse of you on that account." Merriman is perpetually halting to say things like this. It is not wise, it is not necessary, it does not contribute to the story, it has not even the merit of being

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interesting. It is merely a dull and irritating interruption.

Merriman's range was not wide, and he had a trick of monotonously reproducing favourite types of character: the strong, silent, self-contained man; the dreaming, romance-loving damsel; the faithful servitor; the always-on-the-spot, never-leave-the-family, do-or-die retainer; the plausible, sinister, polished, gentlemanly villain, with a *billet-doux* or a superhuman plot in his waistcoat-pocket, and a dagger or a revolver concealed in his bosom. But in his best books he has such an interesting tale to tell, and tells it in such straightforward and vigorous style, that the reader is carried on a wave of pleasant excitement from start to finish, and does not pause to observe defects with a critical eye.

His stories have been collected in a neat pocket edition of fourteen volumes, and they are worth buying. The best of them are worth re-reading several times, and that is a severe test of any author. The three finest of the tales are *The Sowers*, *With Edged Tools*, and *In Kedar's Tents*. I have read the first of these half a dozen times, and always with pleasure. *The Sowers* is a tale of Russia, and tells of a benevolent Prince who tries to administer the affairs of his province in a fair-minded fashion, educating the peasants on his estate to better things. With the help of his trusty adviser and administrator, Karl Steinmetz, the Prince sows the seed of kindness, intelligence, and self-respect in the dull minds of his oppressed and down-trodden peasantry ;

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secretly, because of the vigilant authorities ; disguised, because of the unreasoning hatred and suspicion in which all princes and officials are held by the people. The scenes in which the Prince, disguised as "The Moscow Doctor," goes into the filthy dwellings of the villagers and treats them in time of plague and famine and distress, are full of natural power and pathos, the more telling because of their manifest truth and simplicity. The worst foes of *The Sowers* are those whom they are trying to help.

A romantic interest is lent to the story by the intriguing and shallow-hearted Etta ; and a character of singular power is drawn for us in Catrina, the Russian girl whose one physical glory is her hair. She is one of Merriman's chief successes among his women characters. Of the men, the Prince is a typical Merriman male—physically large, mentally slow, morally simple and just, a man with a purpose, who moves unflinchingly and without deviation to a definite end ; De Chauxville, the French diplomat, is a charmingly melodramatic villain ; Vassili, the Russian diplomat, ably seconds him ; and Steinmetz, the stout, astute, cynical, kindly, middle-aged German, is one of the most lovable and human of all the Merriman gallery.

There are several memorable scenes in the book, scenes that impress themselves upon the mind like a thrilling episode in a play, notably the finding of the straying horse upon the desolate steppe, dragging its dead rider along the frozen ground ; the bear-hunt

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in the forest, white and silent under its virgin snow ; the flogging of De Chauxville by Karl Steinmetz in the tower of the château ; and the storming of the castle by the rising peasants at the close of the tale. The atmosphere of Russia, its vastness, its mysterious secrecy, its fatalism, its possibility, is wonderfully well conveyed. Those who wish to make the acquaintance of an admirable craftsman in the novelist's art cannot do better than turn to Henry Seton Merriman and make a beginning with *The Sowers*.

There are not many men who can write a readable short story. Those who can do it supremely well can be counted on the fingers. It would seem as if it were an easier matter, or at any rate a less difficult matter, to write a full-blown novel. Miniature-painting is an art by itself. A man with a pot of paint can splash about to some purpose on a sign-board, if he has some general notion of a unicorn or a griffin. But set the same man to paint a portrait on ivory, and no muse will befriend him, no invention, no hope. It is much the same with writing tales. A man can wander in a more or less leisurely and desultory fashion over a large field of life, but set him down to do what he can with a single episode, and he lacks the concentration and the delicate touch needed to bring it to artistic perfection.

Many years ago I lighted upon what I have ever since regarded as the most perfectly conceived and perfectly executed short story I have ever read. It

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is by Frederick Wedmore, and is called *A Chemist in the Suburbs*. It is the first of three short stories brought together under one heading or title, *Renunciations*. The volume runs to one hundred pages of fairly large print, with the ample margin characteristic of *The Bodley Head*. The edition I have is limited to three hundred and seventy-five copies, printed on excellent paper. Whether the volume has ever been issued in larger numbers, or whether this is the only edition, I cannot tell. Probably the limited edition is the only one, for the stories would not appeal to the crowd.

A Chemist in the Suburbs is like a bit of rare china, which one handles with reverence and looks at with hushed wonder. It deals in an exquisitely beautiful way with a quality in human nature which has been too often vulgarized by the coarse and clumsy handling of the irreverent and the undiscerning. The brief preface explains: "Three short imaginative pieces—stories I hardly call them—are brought together here under one name. Something, at all events, they have in common. Two at least deal with the renunciation, voluntary or necessitated, of a great love—or, I would say, rather, of love's most obvious privileges." Frederick Wedmore is himself an artist and an art-critic, and has the delicate perception needful for the understanding and appreciation of artistic values.

His story, *A Chemist in the Suburbs*, is very brief; it is merely an episode in the life of a cultured bachelor. We can well imagine what some writers

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would have made of such an episode, and we can easily believe that many would see nothing in it at all. The incident is told at once in the abrupt opening sentences; the remainder of the story tells how it all happened. "Richard Pelse was the chemist. The suburb was near the Angel; at the top of the City Road; on the confines of Islington. There he led his prosaic life—getting old, and a bachelor. But into the prosaic years—years before Islington—there had burst once the moment of romance. Then his shop was near Oxford Street. Into the sitting-room over it there had come one evening for an hour the lady of his dream. Unexpectedly: suddenly. She had drawn her chair, by his own, to the fire. They had sat together so; and he had been happy. She had given him his tea; had opened his piano; had played, a while, Xaver Scharwenka's wild music; had kissed him once; and had gone away. Perhaps his years before and after had seemed at times two deserts, divided by that living stream which was her momentary presence. Or perhaps there was an outstretched darkness on one side of the heavens; then a star; then again outstretched darkness—the life of the shop and the suburb."

That is the whole episode; no more, no less. But the charm of it is in the telling. Frederick Wedmore's style has an aroma of its own. It exhales a fragrance. It lingers on the ear like a tender refrain, haunts one like a sudden glimpse of unexpected beauty. There is passion in the story, and

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one knows how passion is handled nowadays by the mob of ladies and gentlemen who write with fatal ease. They would have bedraggled such an episode as this in the mire, fouled it with the lubricity of the Orient. But Frederick Wedmore has a healthy mind and a wholesome imagination, which are reflected in his style. There is an exquisite restraint about him. His manner of writing reminds one of the Worcester cup or the Chelsea figure Richard Pelse kept in his cabinet—things of which he knew the beauty, the free artistic touch.

The chief charm of a story told in Frederick Wedmore's way is that derived from the unobtrusive suggestion of a spiritual background to life. By that I mean that an impression is somehow conveyed, by a score of delicate touches, that life is not a cut-and-dried thing, the arena of fate, a pre-arranged plot performed by helpless puppets; but that there is sufficient freedom in human character to admit of surprises. More than that: an impression is somehow conveyed of something behind the sordid materialism of the day; something beneath the tumultuous and bewildering surface; something beyond the play of the senses—that the great and memorable experiences take place in the soul—that life is not a record of things done, but of things thought, felt, hoped for, striven after—of things that wait for fulfilment elsewhere. I do not know how otherwise to express it, nor can I tell in what subtle fashion this impression is conveyed. But I do know that every really great writer has this touch of

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wonder—has it, perhaps, in spite of a theory of life that ignores the Unseen, or of a creed that finds no room for the free agency of the spirit. Temperament counts more for a man's attitude towards life than creed or theory. And if a man is an artist and a poet, he will often express things in his writing, suggest things by his style, which he might very likely deny if submitted to his cold reason. But he cannot prevent the overflow of his personality, of which reason is only a part; his personality is made up of countless influences, and it stands forth on the printed page in such truth of presentation that the reader knows instinctively whether he is drawn to the writer or repelled by him. There are some writers who write exquisite things, but something in themselves prevents trust and affection on the part of their readers. There are some writers who write of strange and seamy aspects of life, but if they wrote in such a way as to suggest an intimate acquaintance with the devil, we should still draw to them, feeling that they are men worth knowing and worthy to be loved. There are some writers who write with so graceful a touch, so tender a feeling, so true a sympathy, so rich an understanding, that we feel that they are unfolding themselves to us, and not merely writing a tale at so much per thousand words. Of this last select company is Frederick Wedmore. He writes for the pleasure of writing, to produce a perfect thing. Such a writer will not produce much, in the manner of an exuberant creator; but what he does produce will be as sweet and fresh as the primrose

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in the wood; thrilling and memorable as the first skylark of spring.

It is a severe test of a book to read it a second time. If it survives the test it need not be regarded as a classic or reckoned among the select company of books that never die; but it is at least proof of some genuine human interest in the writing, of some streak of power in the author, of some degree of perception and appreciation in the reader. A book is a classic when it has something universal in it, something that transcends locality and period, something timeless, by virtue of which it survives the centuries, and appeals to successive generations of readers. It is difficult to account for the fascination of some books, and it is quite impossible in many cases to convey to another person what it is that has made you almost idolize a certain author. It comes with a shock of surprise, and almost of pain, to discover that the story that you devoured with such absorbing interest has left your neighbour perfectly cold. The recommendation of books is a risky experiment, from which, perhaps, it is best to refrain. When your friend declines to read Dickens, or can see nothing in Charlotte Brontë, or is utterly unmoved by Stevenson, what can you do but retire into your shell and go home to read *Pickwick*, or *Jane Eyre*, or *Treasure Island* for the twentieth time? You need waste no time in discussion or vituperation. The man has a blind spot in his mind; let him alone.

The reward of the physician is the adoration of the grateful patient. By the exercise of his skill, or

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possibly by some happy accident, the doctor has effected a cure in some difficult or peculiar or dangerous case, and henceforth he is a friend for life. Happy the doctor who has a dozen such. A grateful patient is the best possible advertisement, for nothing will keep him from talking. So with an author who captures the affection of a reader by a book that has brought pleasure and solace and healing to a weary mind; he has his grateful patients by the score. I should like to be able to tell Charles Dickens all he has been to me. I should like to be able to write a letter of thanks to the exile in Samoa. I should like to be able to shake hands with Emerson and Browning, Lamb and Hood. Indeed, there are many scribes to whom I could wish to pay my tribute in person. But, alas! these stalwarts are gone beyond recall, and they have no need of praise.

Only once did I ever summon up courage to express my gratitude to a living author. I wrote to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to thank him for *Sherlock Holmes*, for whom I cherish a lively admiration, and received the most kindly and gracious of letters in reply. When I was a boy of fourteen I wrote to W. G. Grace, who was the hero of my youth, and actually had the impudence to solicit his photograph. To my enormous astonishment and delight the great cricketer responded by sending his photograph signed, with an autograph letter, both of which I cherish to this day—an act of *grace* indeed.

I did not set out to tell this, but what I really wanted to do was to confess myself one of the tribe

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of grateful patients, and especially to pay a humble tribute to Sir Gilbert Parker, whose beautiful story, *The Right of Way*, I have lately been reading for the fourth time. It is not fair to give away the plot of a story, but one may say something of the characters. *The Right of Way* is really a great book. It is this in virtue of its fine workmanship, its truth to nature, its manifest sincerity, its depth of feeling, its touches of unforced beauty, its keen insight, its richness of characterization.

It is great also in respect of its hero. Any writer might well be proud of Charley Steele. He is a veritable creation. He has as strong and distinct an individuality as such very diverse persons as John Ridd, Sydney Carton, Sam Weller, or Sherlock Holmes. It is singular how certain characters in fiction seize upon one's imagination and leave an indescribable impression, so that certain idiosyncrasies are for ever associated with their names. We cannot think of Mr. Pickwick without thinking of gaiters and benevolence; or of David Pew without recalling the green shade over his eyes and the tapping stick and the horrible fierce hand-grip, like a vice; or of the Private Secretary without remembering his Bath bun and his dislike of London; or of Falstaff without hearing the rich, unctuous roll of his voice and obtaining a whiff of sack. At the name of Charley Steele there comes at once the vision of a mocking eye-glass, masking the quizzical spirit behind it; a polished monocle, which is a symbol of the man who toys with it and stares through it—

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a kind of glittering note of interrogation, a window through which the bright blue eye gazes critically upon the world, an emblem of scepticism; and we see the brilliant, dissipated, critical barrister who carries a hostile jury away by his eloquence, and unbalances easy-going minds with his eternal questioning "I wonder?" upon his lips.

Yet it is this man, so splendidly drawn from the very beginning of the book, with much that is cold and repellent about him, who gradually plays upon our heart-strings until he becomes one of the most lovable characters in modern fiction. By an accident through which his memory is lost, and a slow recovery among the mountains under the devoted care of the very man his eloquence had rescued from the gallows, the deeper Charley Steele is born; and henceforth his changed life among the peasants of Chaudière is related with a beauty, a simplicity, a rich suggestiveness, that make the story as fascinating as life itself. The experience of Charley Steele in the little shop of Louis Trudel, the miserly superstitious tailor, and the love-story of Rosalie Evanturel, are things that abide in the grateful memory for long. I have not for many a year read anything more powerful and affecting in its simple restraint than the death of Charley Steele:

"'See!' he said, pointing, 'who is that? Who? I can't see his face—it is covered. So tall—so white! He is opening his arms to me. He is coming—closer—closer. Who is it?'

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“‘It is Death, my son,’ said the priest in his ear, with a pitying gentleness.

“The Curé’s voice seemed to calm the agitated sense, to bring it back to the outer precincts of understanding. There was an awestruck silence as the dying man fumbled, fumbled over his breast, found his eye-glass, and, with a last feeble effort, raised it to his eye, shining now with an unearthly fire. The old interrogation of the soul, the elemental habit, outlived all else in him. The idiosyncrasy of the mind automatically expressed itself.

“‘I beg—your—pardon,’ he whispered to the imagined figure, and the light died out of his eyes, ‘have I—ever—been—introduced—to you?’

“‘At the hour of your birth, my son,’ said the priest, as a sobbing cry came from the foot of the bed.

“But Charley did not hear. His ears were for ever closed to the voices of life and time.”

Of recent years a spate of detective stories has flooded the pages of the monthly magazines. The instantaneous and extraordinary success of *Sherlock Holmes* in the early numbers of the *Strand* set all the ingenious wits of the short-story writers at work, trying to emulate the doughty deeds of that sleuth-hound of crime. There is a dormant detective in most of us. The human mind dearly loves a mystery. The curious, the grotesque, the bizarre, sets a chord a-quivering in every man’s brain. We rather fancy ourselves as discoverers of secrets, and we write

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down "Dr. Watson" an ass of the first magnitude. It needs no little dexterity to construct a story which will keep a man absorbed and intent till midnight by the sheer interest and ingenuity of its plot, and a detective story stands or falls by its plot. The characters may be interesting enough—occasionally one may meet with a positive creation—but for the most part they are there as puppets to play their part in the mystery; and, after all, the mystery's the thing.

It is common with certain would-be superior persons (with whom we desire to have no part or lot, and from whom we would fain separate ourselves by the diameter of a universe) to sniff at the detective story as beneath the dignity of literature; but the best kind of detective tale requires a faculty of invention, an adroitness in devising complications, a skill in dove-tailing, a closeness and lucidity of narration, involving talent of a high order. When the thing is supremely well done, as in the case of Poe's *Tales* and the best of the *Sherlock Holmes* series, we experience a memorable and incommunicable thrill for which we owe the author a debt of gratitude for life.

One of the pioneers in this class of writing was Wilkie Collins, and it seems strange when we consider the exceedingly high quality of his work and the wide popularity he once enjoyed, that he should now have fallen into comparative neglect. There is no man who can devise a mystery and handle a detailed and complicated plot with greater skill. I

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have recently been reading *The Moonstone* for the second time, which is one of the cleverest and most absorbing stories of detection in existence. Wilkie Collins used often to employ a certain literary device with remarkable effectiveness—that of making several of the principal characters in the story each narrate his own share in the gradual working out of the mystery. He employs this device with great skill in *The Moonstone*, and the changes of style appropriate to each character are admirably managed. The section related by Miss Clack, an evangelical spinster, whose idea of piety takes the form of distributing inappropriate tracts and managing everybody's business but her own, is particularly effective, and gives rise to some of the most amusing scenes and conversations in the whole book. The narrative of Gabriel Betteridge is capital; his blunt, straightforward speech, his comments on the chief actors, his frequent digressions, and his worshipful admiration of *Robinson Crusoe*, make delightful reading.

Collins is a master of mysteries, and his frequent plan of giving extracts from diaries, quotations from letters, excerpts from documents, and personal narratives, gives remarkable vividness and actuality to the tale. Swinburne was a great admirer of Collins's work, and remarks very justly that he had the gift of exciting a curiosity, which in the case of the younger and more impressible readers amounts to anxiety. Reading some of his books for the first time, there are certain scenes and situations where the reader holds his breath in a fever of anticipation.

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One of the great arts of a good writer of detective stories is that of drawing "a red herring" across the reader's track. Wilkie Collins possessed this art to perfection. When the mystery is a little difficult to hold, and seems likely to slip from his grasp and disclose itself before its time or to give too leading a hint, he cunningly lays a fresh trail and puts the reader cleverly off the scent. It is the device of the conjuror, who, in order to allay suspicion and divert attention from a critical movement or sign, indulges in engaging and humorous "patter," or innocently invites the interest of the audience to a point which has little or nothing to do with the vital issue. In *The Moonstone* Collins makes excellent use to this end of the strange conduct of Rosanna Spearman, the servant-maid, with her suddenly conceived passion for young Franklin Blake, and her curious attraction towards "the shivering sands." The mysterious behaviour of this weird maiden with a chain and a box on the sands when the tide is at its ebb heads the reader off, so to speak, from the main track, and sets him wandering and wondering after other matters. Wilkie Collins is an adept at this red-herring trick, and adopts it in many of his tales, notably in *The Moonstone* and in *The Woman in White*. It is tricky, but clever; and with a detective writer, perfectly legitimate. It is one of the marvellous intricacies of construction that so repeatedly amaze and occasionally irritate us in these excellent tales. As Anthony Trollope remarked about his fellow-novelist: "The construction is most minute

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and most wonderful, but I can never lose the taste of the construction. The author seems always warning me to remember that something happened at exactly half-past two o'clock on Tuesday morning, or that a woman disappeared from the road just fifteen yards beyond the fourth milestone."

But it is an ungrateful business to sit down and deliberately pick holes in a story which has given one a few hours of pleasant relaxation and helped one to forget for a while the worries of the world. Not everyone can write a book or preach a sermon, but the merest schoolboy deems himself capable of criticizing it and pulling it to pieces. Dr. Parker once referred in his caustic and inimitable fashion to the folk who are in the habit of criticizing sermons in a small and niggling way, thus: "You say you thought the sermon very good when you heard it, but when you came to take it to pieces you were surprised to find how little there was in it. How foolish, then, to take it to pieces! Take a steam-engine to pieces, and how little there is in it! Take your own face to pieces, and your mother will be ashamed of it! Take a rainbow to pieces, and see how much remains to be admired! We must judge by the effect of the whole, and not by pieces and sections." Illustrations like that close an argument for ever.

It is undoubtedly true that stories which depend for their effect chiefly upon intricacy of plot lay themselves open to criticism of the severest kind. A slip in character-drawing is excusable, but a mis-

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take in mechanics is disastrous. But a reader cannot bring himself to be over-critical about an author who has charmed away his "blues," or excited his imagination, or given him the open sesame to lands of enchantment. One becomes rather impatient with the man who plays cricket from the pavilion, and can tell exactly how every ball should be played, and what the batsman ought to have done to prevent getting out. But the true sporting spectator is grateful for a brave display, though it traverses every canon of cricket orthodoxy. The same is true of the grateful reader. If the book has given him a happy hour, criticism may be reserved till the last judgment.

CHAPTER X

THE GREATHEART OF BOOKLAND

BEFORE leaving these pleasant byways I cannot forbear making a brief excursion into the Highways of Bookland, and confessing with gratitude my infinite debt to the two writers who hold first place in my heart, Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson. The thoughts of many worshippers were turned in the year 1912 to the various shrines associated with the genius of Dickens. In that centenary year many pilgrimages were made to the places immortalized by his magic pen, and many eyes scanned the pages of his various works. For my own part, I celebrated the occasion by re-reading *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and the *Christmas Books*, and renewing acquaintance with the crowd of characters that haunt especially the neighbourhood of Salisbury and London.

I well remember the delight with which I read *Chuzzlewit* in boyhood. It was the discovery of a new world. No thought of criticism marred the rich enjoyment. Every chapter was a surprise, every character a revelation, and anybody who had ventured a single word of disparagement would have

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come off badly in the encounter. To re-read in later life an author who has won our affection and captured our imagination in our younger days is always a dangerous experiment, and it must be confessed that not many authors survive the ordeal with credit. How does it stand with Dickens? The early glamour is gone, it is true; the thrill of first love can never be repeated. One knows exactly what is coming; every character is an old acquaintance; the scenes unfold themselves with a certain stiffness, like a panorama which has been long upon the road, and the pictures move a little jerkily instead of with their pristine smoothness. Yet in spite of this, Dickens comes out of the trying test of reperusal with extraordinary success, and if the first glamour is gone, there is still enough of the mystic "light that never was on land or sea" to make it a very welcome and happy experience. The fact is that Dickens is the novelist of youth, for he himself is like a perpetual boy; and if the reader has retained a youthful heart with the passage of the years, he can company with Dickens to the end, feeling still the throb of his high spirits and the contagion of his exuberance, and profoundly grateful that they ever met.

At the same time, there is a difference. One cannot help the emergence of the critical faculty. At times, indeed, it may still be submerged beneath the flood of affection and gratitude, but in calmer moods it asserts its right and demands to have its word. But the faults of Dickens as a writer are of

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such a nature that criticism can never have a sting in it. His defects are the defects of transcendent qualities. His faults are the faults of superabundant life. The unpardonable sin of dulness can never be laid at his door. The fertility of his invention, the exuberance of his fancy, the energy of his description, the power of his delineation, are so remarkable that criticism is often swept away in the torrent. There are no books that so overflow with life. The scenes are branded for ever in the memory; the characters we know better than we know our friends.

Dickens is not a painter of miniatures; he is a painter of sign-boards. But they are gorgeous sign-boards. Perhaps it would be better to describe him as a scene-painter. His effects are broad, immediate, glaring, sometimes grotesque; the colours are laid on thick and brilliant, and owe much of their ultimate effect to the lighting arrangements of his kindling and many-coloured imagination. Dickens is often criticized for his exaggeration and caricature; but it is no disparagement, though it is intended to be such. Exaggeration is merely emphasis. The same criticism might be made of Nature herself. She is continually emphasizing her effects. She flings her sunsets on the skies with a richness and recklessness that arrest the most indifferent spectator. Turner's reply to the lady who complained that she had never seen such colours as he put into his pictures was: "Ah, madam, don't you wish you could?" And I have often felt inclined to say to those persons who

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complain that they never meet such characters as Dickens creates: "Ah, sirs, don't you wish you could?" After all, a good deal depends upon the observer. If a man is colour-blind, he cannot appreciate the evening sky in autumn. If Dickens had not emphasized his characters, they would not live as they do. He flings them at us like the colours of a sunset, and we complain of their exaggeration. It is not a criticism so much as a confession of ineptitude.

Martin Chuzzlewit is made up of two elements—satire and melodrama. In the American portions of the story Dickens gives his satirical vein full scope. If the charge of unreality can be fairly substantiated, it is here. For his Elijah Pograms, Jefferson Bricks, Colonel Divers, General Scadders, and the rest are not actual persons, they are rather exaggerated types; they are the violent and explosive characteristics of America embodied; they are distorted opinions walking about in flaming guise, seen in the glaring limelight of the novelist's over-excited imagination. The Pecksniff and Jonas Chuzzlewit parts of the book are pure melodrama. No sane person can believe in Pecksniff, and with all his art, Dickens does not persuade us that Tom Pinch really believed in him. Yet Pecksniff is as immortal as Pickwick. The scene at *Todgers's*, where Pecksniff imbibes too much punch, and is borne to bed up the top flight of stairs, and appears at intervals in his nightgown, addressing high-flown sentiments over the banisters, and earnestly request-

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ing to know Mrs. Todgers's opinion on a wooden leg, is one of those things that defy analysis, like an exquisite fragrance or a subtle taste. Then there are the incomparable scenes at *The Blue Dragon*, where Mrs. Lupin dispenses lavish hospitality, and Mark Tapley embodies and imparts his philosophy of being "jolly." There is the scene at Tom Pinch's lodgings, where Ruth makes the famous beef-steak pudding; and the scene in *Fountain Court*, where, beneath the shadow-tracery of the waving trees, and within hearing of the pleasant plash of the fountain, Ruth gives her maiden heart to John Westlock. These are things that live in the memory like a strain of haunting music.

But the crowning triumph of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is Sarah Gamp. There is nothing like the glorious inconsequence of her soliloquies to be found in literature. There is a chapter—Chapter Forty-Nine—which I always approach with a tremor of excitement, though I know it almost by heart. It bears the enticing heading: "In which Mrs. Harris, assisted by a teapot, is the cause of a division between friends." With this delicious preparation we are introduced to Mrs. Gamp's apartment, the mere description of which is one of the unforgettable things, and forthwith we are regaled with the famous quarrel between Sarah Gamp and Betsey Prig over their intensely pickled salmon and two-penny salad, to say nothing of the spirits which, "from motives of delicacy," it was Mrs. Gamp's habit to keep in a teapot. It is as great and famous

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a quarrel as that between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Cæsar*. That Chapter Forty-Nine shines like a planet amid the sparkling firmament of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The man who could write such a scene is one of the benefactors of mankind.

When a favourite novelist essays a new style of writing, there is apt to be schism among his devoted followers. They have admired him for certain special qualities, and have grown accustomed to dwell on certain peculiar characteristics, and have come to expect a certain definite method; and when their hero breaks out suddenly into a new style and upsets all their previous theories and expectations, they are apt to resent the change, and are afflicted with a sense of chagrin or even dismay. To some persons versatility is a variety of immorality. Charles Dickens of all men appeared to be immune from this distressing literary vagabondage. He was a breezy, rollicking, exuberant humorist; the knight of caricature; the supreme exponent of exaggeration, oddity, and queerness; he went on his way unsuspected of a plus quantity. But genius never moves uniformly in a calculated orbit. Dickens broke entirely new ground and revealed an altogether different style in two attempts at the historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. The first tale was an endeavour to reproduce the strange period in which Lord George Gordon figured so largely in the "No Popery" riots; the second attempted to recapture the stormy scenes of the French Revolution. Singularly enough, both tales

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deal with events belonging to the same year, 1775. In each Dickens achieved a large measure of success. The difference in theme is enough to account for the difference in style. The books are not without their grotesque characters and their humorous touches, but it would be impossible to deal with a serious and important period of history in the spirit of *The Pickwick Papers* or *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In taking up the period of the French Revolution Dickens made a bold experiment. It was away from his ordinary beat altogether, and involved a complete change of method and outlook. Many of the characters are true Dickens characters, such as Jerry Cruncher and Miss Pross; but they seem somehow to be out of the picture, and to be wandering out of their natural sphere. The success of the book lies more in its atmosphere than in its portraiture. Like Carlyle, Dickens has conveyed the emotional element of that terrible time with extraordinary force.

The book opens with an air of mystery, and admirably conveys the impression of coming doom. The storm lowers in the very first chapter. The description of Mr. Jarvis Lorry's journey in the stage-coach at night; the sound of Jerry Cruncher's horse galloping through the gloom; the suspicion of the various travellers, and the apprehensiveness of the guard; the delivery of the strange message; the stranger answer given to it—*Recalled to Life*—all this arouses interest and expectation, and the reader feels that coming events are indeed casting portentous shadows before. The story advances slowly

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into the very midst of the gathering clouds of revolution. We are present in the thronging streets of Paris, bewilderment, mistrust, and fear on every hand. We enter the gloomy fortress of the dread Bastille, and witness the recall of Dr. Manette. The page is dominated by the bullying Defarge and the grim figure of Madame Defarge. A creepy thrill is conveyed by the presence of the knitting women watching and waiting. We hear the rising hum of the surging crowds and the rumble of the tumbril-carts. We see the streets run with blood, and the glittering knife of the guillotine. The air is heavy with menace and disaster. The fragile form of Lucy Manette glides through the gathering shadows like a pale ghost.

The glory of the tale is Sydney Carton. Nothing finer than the presentation of this character is to be found in modern fiction. Reckless, dissipated, unfortunate, despairing, brilliant, lovable; himself his worst enemy; a man of great gifts who has failed through folly and neglect; imagining that his life is useless, yet a man capable of the noblest thought and feeling, the most splendid daring, the warmest friendship, the sublimest sacrifice. There is no one who tugs at our heart-strings with a stronger pathos, or towards whom we lean with a deeper human sympathy and understanding. The closing scenes of the book approach sublimity. The sacrifice of Carton for his friend Darnay is a type of all that is greatest, most beautiful, and most heroic in human experience. Holding the hand of his protégée, the

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little seamstress, with infinite tenderness, and speaking words of comfort and of hope as they go together on their last ride, he passes to his doom. Some of us have seen the beautiful interpretation of Sydney Carton by Mr. Martin Harvey in his fine drama, *The Only Way*; and the final scene, where he mounts the steps of the guillotine and stands pale but unshrinking beneath the dreadful blade, is a picture to be carried for ever in the memory, and a perfect realization of the last pages of Dickens's pathetic story. As we close the book, Carton's last words linger in our ears like a sad but exquisite refrain: "It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

The season of Christmas is a peculiarly English institution, and Charles Dickens is its prophet. He understood the genius of the time as no other man has ever done. He was alive to all its beauty, susceptible and responsive to all its suggestion and romance. He revelled in it with all the breathless interest and intensity of a child. He caught its mystery, and his heart throbbed with its poetry. And as a result of this he wrote five little books which specially commemorate the Christmas season and admirably express its spirit. All of them are true Dickens documents, and at least one of them will live among the masterpieces of English literature. I read an article the other day by some abandoned cynic, in which he condemned Christmas and all its sentimental works, and consigned them,

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metaphorically, to a sultry climate. I believe the wretch actually obtained a prize of two guineas for it. I hope those two guineas have long since burned holes in his trouser pockets, and raised blisters that will remind him for ever of his perfidy. He may have done it for a practical joke, in order to "pull the leg" of sentimental, old-fashioned creatures like myself; or perhaps he was hard up, and really wanted those two guineas; or perhaps he did not much care what he wrote. If he was in earnest, he was a son of perdition (and I ask no pardons) !

But the editor was even worse. An editor who could offer a prize for the best article *against* Christmas is a monster. Perhaps he did not mean it, and would no doubt plead that even editors must live—the which is a doubtful declaration. And if we are to be smart and clever and original nowadays we must be iconoclasts and renegades, defy the conventions, outrage the orthodox, pooh-pooh the simple, abjure the commonplace. We must make the gentle reader stare at our audacity, pierce him with our epigrams, brain him with our controversial sledgehammer, bewilder him with paradox, and give a naked and unashamed display of our glorious freedom and independence of thought. The writer of the article referred to was particularly hard upon the sentimentality of Christmas, and bitterly complained that it helped to foster our illusions. That is one of the reasons why I like it. I want to keep some, at any rate, of my illusions as long as I can.

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I want (once a year at least) to riot in sentimentalism. I want to be a child for ever. I think that the worst of all the ills that flesh is heir to is the malady of growing up. The writer of that article had grown up, and two guineas was a mighty poor recompense for his immeasurable loss.

If ever a man understood and loved the spirit of Christmas, it was Dickens. His *Christmas Carol* is the New Testament of the hallowed time. But his *Pickwick Papers* glorify the season even more richly than the *Carol*. Never was the spirit of the time—its gaiety, its fun, its good humour, its kindly feeling—so exquisitely realized. The critics of Dickens accuse him of wallowing in sentiment. It seems to me that such critics are not only utterly blind to Dickens's genius and method, but they are entirely out of sympathy with the spirit of the present age. For this is the age of democracy, and Charles Dickens is the prophet of democracy. He had an intense sympathy with the poor, the neglected, the down-trodden, the disinherited. He loved the vulgar crowd, if you like to call it so. He had an extraordinary insight into the lives of the humble and the illiterate.

There are people who say that they wish Dickens was more refined. But, as Mr. Chesterton characteristically observes, "if those people are ever refined, it will be by fire." It is the glory of Dickens that he saw the essential greatness and dignity of human nature even when it is wrapped up in a humble, a vulgar, a grotesque, an eccentric form. These

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same superior folk rail at Dickens because he made his Christmas so much a matter of material comfort—a thing of poultry, pudding, and punch. One might deferentially affirm that there are worse things in the world than poultry, pudding, and punch; and among those worse things is the perverse pig-headedness which cannot see or will not allow that Dickens's jovial Christmas is the manifestation of a great heart touched to finer issues by the poetry of the season, the disclosure and expression of thoughts that have been set to a dance measure by remembrance of the Child of Bethlehem. A spirituality which has no visible embodiment is not of much utility in a world like ours; and if there is any season in the year that unlocks selfish hearts and thaws the ice of reserve in one's breast, impelling human nature to remember its poorer, less happy, and less fortunate brethren in material gifts, we should bless that season, and welcome it and make much of it, because in making us humane it makes us friends with all mankind. This is what Dickens does by his glorification of Christmas. He waves his wand like some genial magician, and brings back the child heart once more out of the shadows of the past; and a man who can do that for us is one of the Greathearts of mankind.

A Christmas Carol, The Chimes, The Cricket on the Hearth, The Haunted Man, The Battle of Life—these are the titles of the five Christmas books. They have all enjoyed enormous popularity, and the *Carol* has sung its way into many thousands of grateful

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hearts all the world over. It is a book any man might be proud and glad to have written. Thackeray said he regarded it as a national benefit, and perhaps of all Dickens's books it is the one which has brought him into closest personal touch with his readers and made him most universally beloved.

I have already referred to the fact that it has been brought as a charge against him that his view of Christmas is largely pagan and distinctly gastronomic. It is undoubtedly true that he fairly revels in the old-fashioned Christmas of holly and mistletoe, turkeys and mince-pies, candied fruits and steaming bowls of punch. It is also true that he takes an extraordinary and even gormandizing interest in eating and drinking and everything pertaining to physical comfort and satisfaction. This is part of his gospel, arising partly out of his exuberant and legitimate appreciation of the good things of the world, and partly out of his genuinely deep sympathy with the poor and the afflicted and the miserable. But he must be a very blind or a very prejudiced reader who cannot see beyond these material outworks to the citadel of the author's heart, and feel the warmth of his affection and the throb of his tender pity. The eating and drinking are the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Dickens had a heart of gold, and out of that generous mint there flowed a wonderful wealth of kindness, compassion, tenderness, good-fellowship, cheerfulness, and mirth. I do not envy the man who can read *A Christmas Carol* unmoved,

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or without feeling that he has been bathing in an atmosphere of deep spiritual emotion. The humaneness of the book is extraordinary, and if a man is not melted to tears by Tiny Tim, or irradiated by the light that shines from Old Fezziwig's calves, he is a dead dog, and even the lightnings cannot touch him.

Dickens is a great believer in "atmosphere," and he knows well how to convey it. Whether it be exterior or interior, he is equally at home. What a hand he has for describing fog and frost and snow! How the fog is diffused throughout *The Chimes*! How it pervades the opening chapters of the *Carol*! How he makes us feel the cold! Then what a touch he has for the various pedestrians in the streets—how vividly we see them with their ruddy cheeks and smoking breath, flapping their arms and stamping their feet to keep themselves warm! How real the shops are with their lighted windows piled with all the most tempting delicacies of the season! What a dream is the grocer's! what a distraction the poulterer's! Then the wizard takes us into the bare room of Scrooge, and we see Bob Cratchit shivering in "The Tank." He shows us the hilarious Christmas party at Scrooge's nephew's, where, in blind-man's-buff, Topper went after the plump sister in the lace tucker in so scandalous a fashion. He opens Bob Cratchit's door, and we see the young Cratchits seated at the table, cramming spoons into their mouths lest they should shriek for goose before it came to their turn to be helped; and later we

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behold them steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows. Fires glow and good-fellowship abounds in all these books. Cosiness and comfort almost retard the action of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and although tragedy seems to be impending, we know perfectly well that everything is going to be all right presently. These *Christmas Books* of Dickens are aglow with charity, alive with kindly feeling, a-throb with high spirits, and to read them puts one on better terms with oneself and with all the world.

CHAPTER XI

THE PETER PAN OF BOOKLAND

OLD Izaak Walton quotes with manifest approval the saying about the strawberry: "Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did." In the same spirit I feel moved to say: "Doubtless man may write a better book for boys than *Treasure Island*, but doubtless man never has, and probably never will." It all grew out of a map. Stevenson had a love for maps, and would spend hours poring over them, making imaginary voyages to the ends of the earth. By-and-by he was to become a traveller indeed, and not only a traveller, but an exile, and to find his final resting-place far from the "hills of home." He not only studied maps, but occasionally drew one; and it was out of the map of an imaginary island, shaped something "like a fat dragon standing on his hind-legs," that his first great story grew, and became known to an admiring world as *Treasure Island*. He has told us of the happy hours he spent conceiving and colouring this map, putting in its bays and creeks, its mountains and plains, its woods and streams, until the place began to fascinate him like a romance,

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and he felt as if he knew every mile of it, and could find his way about there blindfold. Looking at it as it stands as the frontispiece to *Treasure Island*, one comes to understand how the place affected his imagination, and one can appreciate the glee with which he selected the spots where the famous treasure of Flint the Buccaneer lay buried, and marked them with red crosses, supposed to be done in the blood of that redoubtable pirate's veins. It is one of the incidental delights in reading the tale to turn to the map now and then to see the identical site of the stockade, and the creek where the *Hispaniola* went ashore, and the rising-ground at the edge of the wood where Long John Silver hurled his crutch through the air, and to trace the incredible voyage of the *Coracle*.

I remember reading an account somewhere by a French writer and critic of his first reading of *Treasure Island* while on a railway journey, and he declares that he was so absorbed with the tale that he "awoke from the dream of his book" with a start, scarcely realizing that he had reached his journey's end. That is precisely what it is—"a dream of a book." I am afraid to say how many times I have read it, each time with fresh interest and delight, and have felt a thrill in my blood as the spirit of adventure claimed me for a space, and whirled me far from the beaten track of men. To a man with a dash of poetry, a vein of romance, a spark of imagination, a suspicion of Bohemianism the tale is simply irresistible. As an admirer ha

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written: "The book is full of the characters that fired the writer's fancy: the picturesque outlaw, half trader, half pirate; the bold buccaneer; captains and sailors—characters with the scent of the brine about them, whom Stevenson worked into scores of fantastic yet always plausible shapes. There are few things in literature more ghostly than the tap-tap of Blind Pew's stick along the lonely frozen road. The book is packed with such effects, and the blackguards who are its heroes are—every mother's son of them—unique and powerful creations, boldly drawn, yet finished with a touch as light as the brush of a butterfly's wing. What reader of *Treasure Island* has not trolled the drunken sailors' chorus—

‘Fifteen men on the dead man's chest,
Yo! ho! ho! and a bottle of rum!’

and felt a pirate to his boots!”

It is interesting to recall how the book was written amid wild December weather over thirty years ago. In August of 1881 the Stevensons moved to a house in Braemar. Let Mr. Edmund Gosse, who has given us such charming reminiscences of his friend, relate the rest: "Hither I was invited, and here I spent an ever memorable visit. The house, as Louis was careful to instruct me, was lugubriously known as 'the late Miss M'Gregor's cottage,' and so I obediently addressed my letters until Louis remarked that 'the reference to a deceased Highland lady, tending, as it does, to foster unavailing sorrow, may with

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advantage be omitted from the address.' We passed the days in regularity. After breakfast I went up to Louis's bedroom, where he sat up in bed, with dark flashing eyes and ruffled hair, and we played chess on the coverlid. Not a word passed, for he was strictly forbidden to speak in the early part of the day. As soon as he felt tired—often in the middle of a game—he would rap with peremptory knuckles on the board as a signal to stop, and then Mrs. Stevenson or I would arrange his writing materials on the bed. Then I would see no more of him till dinner-time, when he would appear, smiling and voluble, the horrible bar of speechlessness having been let down. Then every night after dinner he would read us what he had written during the day. I find in a note to my wife, dated October 3, 1881: 'Louis has been writing, all the time I have been here, a novel of pirates and hidden treasure, in the highest degree exciting. He reads it to us every night, chapter by chapter.' This, of course, was *Treasure Island*. I look back to no keener intellectual pleasure than those cold nights at Braemar, with the sleet howling outside, and Louis reading his budding romance by the lamplight, emphasizing the purpler passages with uplifted voice and gesticulating finger."

The tale duly appeared in a magazine for boys, and at first attracted not the least attention. With characteristic buoyancy, the author, commenting on its initial failure, declared: "I did not care. I liked the tale myself, for much the same reason as my

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father liked the beginning: it was my kind of picturesque. I was not a little proud of John Silver also, and to this day rather admire that smooth and formidable adventurer. What was infinitely more exhilarating, I had passed a landmark; I had finished a tale, and had written "The End" upon my manuscript, as I had not done since *The Pentland Rising*, when I was a boy of sixteen, not yet at college. The tale seems to have given much pleasure, and it brought (or was the means of bringing) fire and wood and wine to a deserving family in which I took an interest. I need scarcely say I mean my own."

There is a breed of critics who are in the habit of comparing one author with another with invidious intent, and there is no habit more irritating and unpleasant. If the landscape were dealt with in this fashion we should justly complain; but nobody seems to see the absurdity and the wrongheadedness of it when writers are thus treated. Nobody thinks of comparing the fir-tree with the oak; nobody dreams of setting off the violet against the tulip, or the primrose against the orchid. Each has its own individuality and stands in its own peculiar beauty. But preachers, poets, artists, and novelists are not allowed to stand on their own merits. Thackeray is brought into violent collision with Dickens. Tennyson is made to contend with Browning. Leighton is set off against Whistler. Of a preacher one may actually hear some such insanity as this: "You know, he has not the polish of Liddon, or the

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unction of Spurgeon, or the learning of Lightfoot, or the homeliness of Norman Macleod, or the stateliness of Caird, or the eloquence of Chalmers, or the dramatic surprise of Parker." Well, now, what if he had all these diverse characteristics? He would not be a minister, he would be a monster.

Some persons, who must have a great deal of time on their hands as well as a great deal of cotton-wool in their brains, have striven to compare Stevenson with Scott. No one would have laughed over it more than Stevenson. The antelope cannot be compared with leviathan. The rapier is not the broadsword, but they each do admirable execution. Stevenson is not Scott, nor is Scott Stevenson; each has a unique and solitary pedestal. I have recently refreshed my jaded mind with *Kidnapped*, and though I had read it two or three times before, it came back as freshly as if it were new. That is a good test of a book. To know exactly what is coming, and yet to be able to read with interest and even a pleasant tang of excitement, is surely a tribute to an author's quality. Adventure is the very breath of Stevenson's stories. From the first page of *Kidnapped* one is kept on the look-out for alarums and excursions, dangers, and surprises. From the moment when David Balfour sets forth for the mysterious House of Shaws we are conscious of a pleasing twitter of excitement.

The style of the writing is so easy, pliant, supple, that one is carried on from page to page without pause or break on the very wings of adventure. The

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art of the book is not so obtrusively obvious as in some of Stevenson's work ; the happy phrase seems more spontaneous and less laboured than in some of his stories—*The Ebb Tide*, for instance. What a number of striking pictures remain in the mind when the book is finished ! Who can forget the arrival of David at the House of Shaws, where he is received at the threatening mouth of a blunderbluss levelled at him from a first-floor window ; or the horrid moment when he finds himself on the dizzy edge of the ruined spiral stair, and sees by a lightning flash amid the rolling storm that he is on the brink of death ? How artfully, too, is the first appearance of Alan Breck related, when the small boat is cut in two by the brig, and that intrepid adventurer hauls himself miraculously on board by a rope dangling from the bowsprit ! I do not recall any more thrilling episode in any book of adventure than the great fight in the round house on the deck of the brig. The odds are overwhelming. It is all so gloriously impossible, yet one feels it must have been just so, and not otherwise. The sword of Alan Breck dazzles the eye ; the very pages seem to glance and glitter with its cuts and thrusts and passes. One hears the howls of pain and the dull thud of falling bodies ; one sees the smoking pistols in David's hands and the blood flowing red over the slippery floor. The enemy is beaten back and badly cowed, and the Song of the Sword of Alan is raised in token of victory. Then there is the vivid incident of the wreck and the casting of David on the barren Isle

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of Earraid, where he spends so many miserable days on a nauseating and well-nigh starvation diet of limpets.

Stevenson is great at weird effects, a notable instance being the tapping of Pew's stick in *Treasure Island*, and that of the leper in *The Black Arrow*. In *Kidnapped* he introduces a similar effect in the case of the blind Catechist whom David Balfour meets upon the moor, and who terrifies him by his explosive talk and sinister ways. Perhaps the greatest chapters of the story are those that recount the famous flight of David and Alan through the heather. The height of adventure is reached here, and through four or five chapters of splendidly sustained interest the reader holds his breath at the series of hairbreadth escapes of the fugitives. The bloom of the heather is over these pages, and one feels the breeze of the moorland, and hears the cry of the curlew, and sniffs the pungent reek of the peat and the sweet scent of the bog-myrtle. The episode of Cluny Macpherson's Cave is singularly attractive, and the figure of that bold, rude, picturesque outlaw is limned in vivid colours.

The characters form a sufficiently varied and startling gallery of portraits. Perhaps David Balfour himself is the least satisfactory; but his sinister uncle, the wretched cabin-boy, the mates of the brig, and Captain Hoseason, are all marvellously graphic and real, while Alan Breck would make the fortunes of a dozen tales. There is no woman in the book, save one or two petticoats that flit shadow-like

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for a moment and disappear, and when one considers this, the absorbing interest of the tale is the more surprising. But Alan Breck is man and woman and child, and while he dominates the scene the deficiency is not noticed. Stevenson had not yet found a sure hand for such a kittle character as a woman. He got near to it in *Catriona*, and with the two Kirsties in *Weir of Hermiston* he arrived.

It is given to few men to achieve fame in many departments; the majority may congratulate themselves if they cut a respectable figure in one. The solitary talent usually confines a man to a beaten track; its limitations are perfectly obvious. Sometimes, however, a talent is so flexible that it ceases to be monotonous, but yields perennial interest. It is an instrument capable of adaptation to various uses. It gives its possessor no opportunity to complain of restriction; to do so would be a manifest ingratitude. The man of letters has a faculty which can be moulded into many forms, as a fluid runs into innumerable vessels and takes the shape of each. Although literature has its recognized forms, its definite rules and methods, there is practically no limit to the modulation of words, the invention of phrases, the arrangement of sentences—the whole rhythm and suggestion of speech. There is as much possibility in an alphabet as there is in the notes of music, and so long as genius endures, we shall never cease to wonder at the miracle of language. It was the continual experimenting of Stevenson in the art of word-weaving, combined with his extraordinary

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versatility of mind, that led him into so many different regions of literary endeavour. The boy in him always came uppermost, seeking fresh outlets ; the spirit of adventure always claimed him, and made him eager to attempt further experiments and to capture new realms. There is hardly any writer of similar eminence who has achieved fame with so miscellaneous a cargo. There are few regions of literature he has left unexplored. The wonderful thing is that a man who thus experimented in so many departments should have attained a high degree of success in each.

Recall the contents of this miscellaneous literary baggage. Four volumes of essays, several romances, two or three books of travel, a couple of historical and topographical works, excursions in biography, tales of mystery and studies in the grotesque, a number of fables, a number of plays, and four volumes of poetry. In addition to these, there are innumerable and inimitable letters, and even a few compositions akin to sermons. It is really a remarkable list. The mere bulk of it excites surprise ; the variety of it is amazing. If the writer had a single manifest failure to record in such circumstances, it would hardly be to his discredit ; but when we consider that in all these literary endeavours we find something to admire and love, the result is indeed astonishing.

Stevenson's output of poems is contained in four slender volumes, bearing the titles, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, *Underwoods*, *Ballads*, and *Songs of Travel*.

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Stevenson is not a poet of the first order ; it would, perhaps, be more correct to call him an accomplished writer of verse. He is not of that select company who occupy the heights on the sunny side of Parnassus. He does not belong to those who sing because they must. He sang rather because it was a fascinating experiment. It was another exercise in the bewitching art of word-weaving, another opportunity for testing the music of speech. We do not think of Stevenson "lipping in numbers." We rather picture him piecing together tuneful phrases and ear-haunting language with a somewhat laborious elaboration. Not for him was the full-throated rush of song, nor the burst of lyrical rapture, nor the spontaneity of glowing passion. His muse had no eagle wing, no soaring flight. Such criticism involves no disparagement. Can we not enjoy these short swallow-flights of song as well as the sustained magnificence of those with more opulent endowment? Stevenson's note is not the rich melody of the nightingale welling from the depths of mystic woods, holding the imagination in the witchery of the midnight hour ; he reminds us more of the robin, with his russet coat and bright, round, inquisitive eye, whose welcome voice pipes to us from the window-sill. What if the poetry of Stevenson be the result of happy and congenial experiment, and not the spontaneous outpouring of a wealth of song? It is Stevenson's poetry! And to say that is to say that it will have an inevitable charm, a distinction, a beauty, a romantic suggestion all its

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own, an originality belonging essentially to his wholesome outlook, a spell inseparable from his engaging personality.

One may be excused if one lingers fondly over his *Child's Garden*. It stands alone in the literature of childhood. Nothing more perfectly real and true of its kind has ever been written. It is a transcript from the nursery, a clear reflection of the heart of an unspoiled imaginative child. The dedication seems almost too intimate and sacred for publicity. It is offered to his old nurse, Alison Cunningham, who tended the delicate frame through so many troubled days of childhood; and it must have warmed her heart to read the tender, grateful, beautiful lines.

Mrs. Stevenson says in a preface to the poems, in the biographical edition of the works, that her husband had very little understanding of children in general, and on one occasion deplored their poverty of resource while he was watching two children at play. So that this *Child's Garden of Verses* is not the result of uncanny insight into the average child's mind, but is really a transcript of Stevenson's own. It is memory of an extraordinarily vivid kind. It is a photograph of an imaginative child's world. The things that most of us quickly forget are the very things that Stevenson has most vividly remembered. This accounts for the shock of delicious surprise which many of us receive on reading this book for the first time. It brings back, as if it were but yesterday, the picture of those hours which in the majority of cases Time so swiftly obliterates. It

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reproduces for us those far-off days when we, too, had an aptitude, now irrecoverably lost, for playing at soldiers; when we, too, saw the devil in the bed-curtains, and lay awake listening fearfully to the wind. The whole world of make-believe is recreated for us in these pages.

Stevenson is a perfect representative of Barrie's immortal *Peter Pan*. How "R. L. S." would have shouted over that wonderful creation! How he would have revelled in the Redskins, and the Home of the Lost Boys, and the Mermaid's Lagoon, and the Pirate Ship, and Wendy's House among the Tree-Tops! Captain Hook and Smee and the Crocodile would have sent him into ecstasies. A man with Stevenson's vivid imaginative equipment is well qualified to be the interpreter of childhood. A man, did I say? Stevenson was rather a kind of eternal child, and never lost the memories and fancies of his earliest years. He never abandoned the habit of playing with lead soldiers and painting scenery for toy theatres. Mr. Edmund Gosse remarks very truly: "Many authors have achieved brilliant success in describing children, in verbally caressing them, in amusing, in instructing them; but only two, Mrs. Ewing in prose and Mr. Stevenson in verse, have sat down with them without disturbing their fancies, and have looked into the world of make-believe with the children's own eyes. If Victor Hugo should visit the nursery, every head of hair ought to be brushed, every pinafore be clean, and nurse must certainly be present, as well as

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mamma. But Mrs. Ewing or Mr. Stevenson might lead a long romp in the attic when nurse was out shopping, and not a child in the house should know that a grown-up person had been there." That is an enviable character to have, and the spirit thus admirably described is seen full measure in these little poems.

The Land of Counterpane, *The Land of Story Books*, *The Gardener*, and *The Lamplighter* always bring back pictures of my own childhood with extraordinary clearness. The soldiers, and the ships that went in fleets "all up and down among the sheets," were mine; mine, too, the piratic excursions round the forest track, "away behind the sofa-back;" mine also the awe of the gardener bending over the distant plots, "old and serious, brown and big." The child's enduring wonder at the sober tastes and inexplicable conduct of his elders is an ever-recurring theme. *The Gardener* affords an excellent illustration of this; the man's remarkable preference for work over play is quite hopeless and even imbecile. I recall the time when the presence of a dark cupboard on the stairs used to fill me with wild alarms as I mounted to my bedroom, and I would whistle loud but somewhat quavering airs as I sped past it in the hope of scaring the ghosts and shadows away. O those black shadows! Stevenson's lines bring them all before me again:

"The shadow of the balusters, the shadow of the lamp,
The shadow of the boy that goes to bed—
All the wicked shadows coming tramp, tramp, tramp,
With the black night overhead!"

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Scattered up and down the *Child's Garden* are some delightful glimpses of the naïve philosophy of childhood. As a general survey of the universe, what could be more artless and true to life than the couplet:

“The world is so full of a number of things,
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings!”

Stevenson has not forgotten, either, the proneness of a child to make a god of the belly:

“It is very nice to think
The world is full of meat and drink,
With little children saying grace
In every Christian kind of place.”

And again:

“The friendly cow all red and white,
I love with all my heart”—

(Surely there must be some poetic reason for this profound emotion)—

“She gives me cream with all her might,
To eat with apple tart!”

A truly noble reason for clasping the cow to one's bosom! Then we get a swift glimpse of the sense of possession dear to every child, the unspeakable pride in what Mr. Wemmick was accustomed to allude to as “portable property”:

“When I am grown to man's estate,
I shall be very proud and great,
And tell the other girls and boys
Not to meddle with my toys.”

And here is that unconscious self-righteousness and

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smug complacency which belong to so many of our bewitching little nursery pharisees :

“ Every night my prayers I say,
And get my dinner every day ;
And every day that I’ve been good,
I get an orange after food.

“ The child that is not clean and neat,
With lots of toys and things to eat,
He is a naughty child, I’m sure—
Or else his dear papa is poor.”

Even as I write, the brave old nurse, to whom this boy that would not grow up wrote his charming dedication, has passed, full of years and memories, into the Great Silence. Through the delicate and thoughtful kindness of a friend I was privileged to meet her a few months before the end, and the interview will always be a treasured recollection. “Cummy,” as Stevenson called her, and as she delighted to be called, thoroughly enjoyed the hero-worship of which she was the centre, and never tired of talking about her “ain laddie.” She was over ninety years of age when I saw her, but she might have been nineteen so far as vivacity was concerned. The only sign of age was her deafness ; but for the rest, she was alert in mind, graphic in speech, quick in memory, brisk in observation, emphatic and final in opinion, and sufficiently nimble in body to trip up and down stairs like a girl, to walk with firm, energetic step, and richly to enjoy all she saw. I saw her in company with a literary friend, and when we were introduced she demanded

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to know which of us was "the minister." She expressed some very natural scepticism on being told that I was the culprit, and appeared a little shocked at the absence of an orthodox clerical collar; but when I told her it was at the wash, she was quite relieved, and friendly relations were immediately established. I have said that some of her views were emphatic. This came out in her vehemently expressed dislike of the portrait of Stevenson now in the National Portrait Gallery, and of the memorial medallion on the wall of St. Giles' Cathedral. She resented, I think, in this last the perpetuation of the invalid, for the medallion depicts the writer sitting up in bed, propped upon pillows, pen in hand, and his writing materials spread before him. It is an unfortunate phase of such a man to perpetuate in bronze, and is certainly not the kind of memorial Stevenson himself would have desired, and the loyal Cummy rejected the representation with scorn. She was voluble and emphatic, again, when she spoke of Henley, whose attack on the character of his dead friend was so bitterly resented at the time. She admitted that Henley was a brilliant writer and a most fascinating man, but she said "he did Louis a great deal of harm." She did not say exactly what she meant by this, but I understood her to mean that Henley's growingly unfriendly attitude had deeply wounded Stevenson's generous heart. She referred, with a break in her voice and a suspicion of moisture in her eyes, to Stevenson's journey to America in an emigrant ship,

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and across the continent to California in an emigrant train, and declared that it was that journey which had really killed him. He lived for several years afterwards, but the effects of that terrible journey were never lost. "His lungs at that period were like a sponge," said Cummy. "Louis describes it all in *Across the Plains*," she said. "It is a book I can't bear to read." I noticed that she was always careful to pronounce his name "Lewis," although he always spelt it in the French fashion. Cummy told us how Louis as a little boy would dictate stories to her by the hour. He would lock the door of the nursery, so that they might be perfectly alone and undisturbed; and then paper and pencils would be produced, and the most wonderful tales would be evolved. Cummy dearly wished she had kept those old manuscripts. But who could have told what was to be? Once, she said, she had put Louis in the corner for some misdemeanour, and when, after a time, she called to him to come out, he refused to stir. Again she called, but still he remained immovable, with his face to the wall. Thinking something was the matter, she went across the room to bring him out of his corner, when, hearing her approaching, he wheeled suddenly round and, lifting up an admonitory finger, said: "Sh! I'm telling myself a story!" How characteristic that was! The child was indeed father of the man.

It was very charming to sit with this dear old lady, listening to her pouring out these simple and tender reminiscences about her "ain laddie"; very

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touching to see how he held her heart still, how proud she was of his fame and of her own intimate association with him, how every simple memory was cherished as a sacred thing. Well she might be proud, for she was in the Stevenson family for forty-five years, and she nursed Louis from the time that he was eighteen months old, and brought him safely through all his childish ailments and frequent severe illnesses, watching all the time the growth of his mind and directing the development of his character. Well she might be proud, for there was a link between these two as strong and sweet and familiar as that between mother and child, and right nobly and beautifully did Stevenson acknowledge his debt when he became a man. Could there be a tenderer or more delicate dedication than that which forms the preface to *A Child's Garden of Verses*? Alison Cunningham needs no better certificate of character than that, and no better epitaph. I count it one of the privileges of my life to have been permitted to clasp that "most comfortable hand," and through it to have greeted the exile who sleeps on Vaea Mountain in Samoa. The last time I was in Edinburgh I went to look at 17, Heriot Row, where the Stevensons used to live. The house was empty, and I would have given much to enter. I compromised matters by mounting the front steps and peeping through the letter-box, and then risked my reputation by publicly and most tenderly embracing the lamp-post that stood in front, believing

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it to be the very lamp-post immortalized in *A Child's Garden*—

“For we are very lucky, with a lamp before the door !”

It may have been another lamp-post altogether—perhaps it was the one at No. 8, Howard Street, where the child was born ; but no matter. It pleased me to think it was the same, and I paid it suitable homage. I thought how often Louis and Cummy must have sat together at the nursery window in the gathering dusk, watching for Leerie “with lantern and with ladder come posting up the street.” I thought of the long nights the sick child lay awake, and the faithful nurse carrying him to the window wrapped in a shawl or blanket, that he might see the lights winking through the mist across the gardens opposite, and catch a glimpse of the bright stars looking down from above. And then I thought of the exile in the South Seas, with Scotland ever in his heart, and of his exquisitely poignant and haunting lines as his thoughts flew homeward :

“Blows the wind to-day, and the sun and the rain are flying,
Blows the wind on the moors to-day and now,
Where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are
crying,
My heart remembers how !”

Stevenson died in 1894, but his faithful old nurse survived him for nearly twenty years. Cummy passed onwards in Edinburgh on July 17, 1913, in her ninety-second year. Well, I am glad to have looked into her face and listened to her voice ; and

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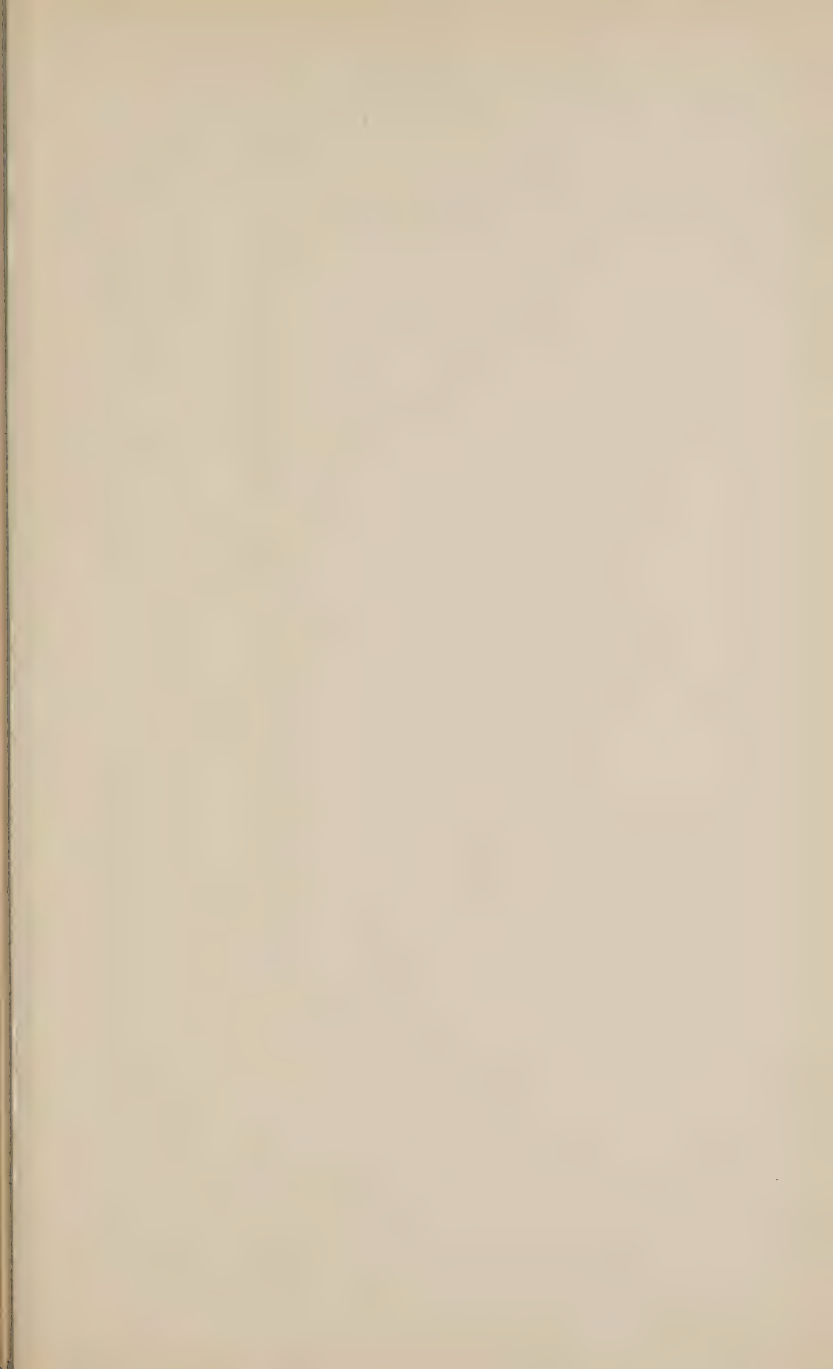
here's my sprig of rosemary—"for remembrance"—
for his sake and her own, to lay upon her grave :

The comfortable hand is still
That smoothed the snow-white pillow-hill ;
Hushed is the kindly voice that read
The stories to the boy abed ;
That calmed the fear and soothed the pain,
Till morning light returned again.
And had you done no more than this,
The world your gentle hand would kiss ;
The sick child in your sunshine grew—
Ah, Cummy, what we owe to you !

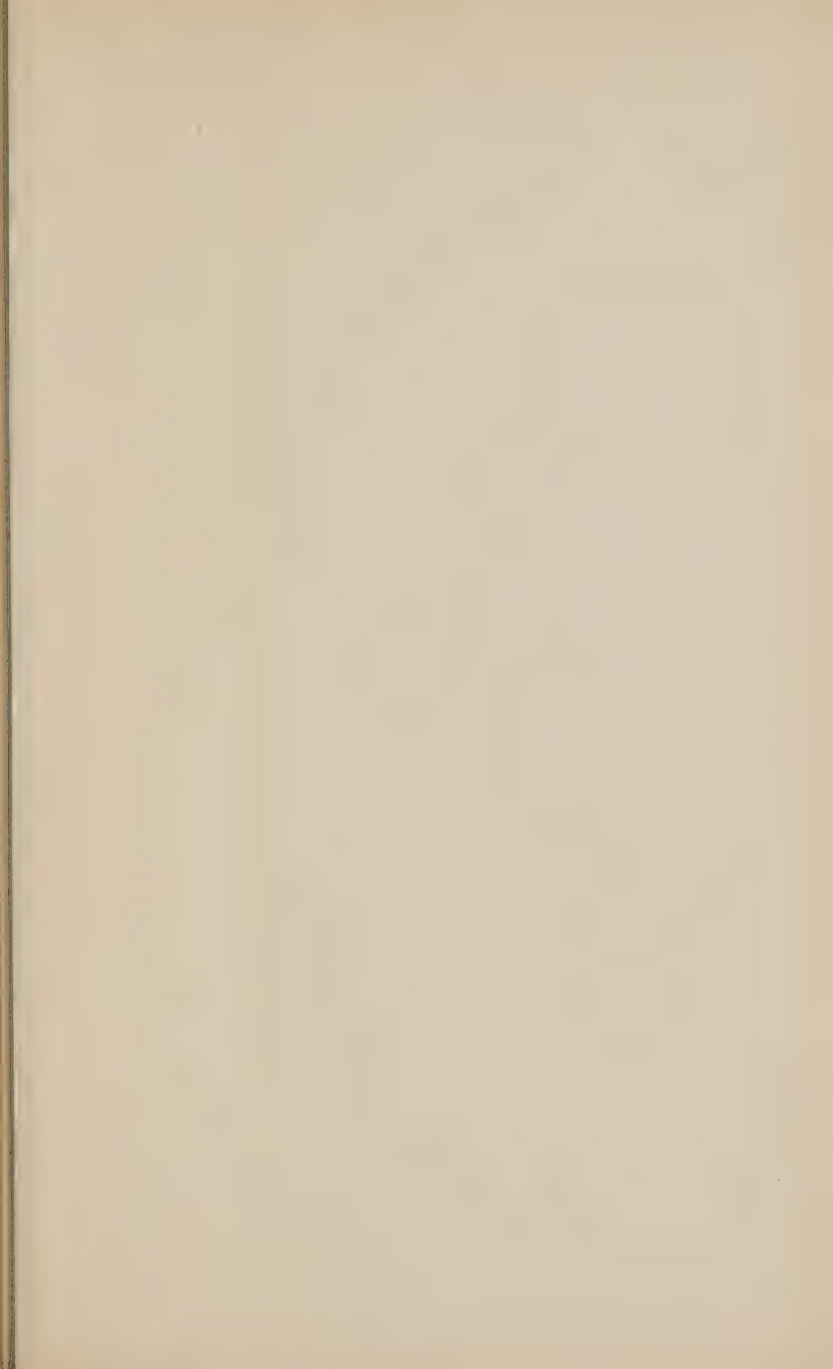
Now you have left us for a while,
And gone to seek your Treasure Isle ;
The last adventure you have gone,
But you will not fare forth alone.
For your "ain laddie" sure will know
The way your weary feet must go ;
The spirit of a little child
Will come from out the unknown wild,
To take the comfortable hand
That led him through the uneven land.
Ah ! just like God, this thing to do,
To send with eager steps for you
Death's angel in the form of "Lou !"

THE END









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